THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

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  - M as in Mayhem
  - The Problem of the Pink Post Office

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Can You Prove It?
by Isaac Asimov

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A new Black Widowers story by Isaac Asimov

While you are reading the newest tale of the Black Widowers, put yourself in the shoes of Mr. John Smith, the guest-grillee at this month's banquet. Could you have resolved Mr. Smith's predicament? Could you have satisfied Vee, the mysterious interrogator? Or would you have landed in an alien prison in an alien country, virtually buried alive and beyond hope of rescue?

Henry, the smoothly functioning waiter at the monthly Black Widowers banquet, filled the water glass of the evening's guest as though knowing in advance that the guest was reaching into his shirt pocket for a small vial of pills.

The guest looked up. "Thank you, waiter — though the pills are small enough to go down *au jus*, so to speak."

He looked about the table and sighed. "Advancing age! In our modern times we are not allowed to grow old *ad lib*. Doctors follow the faltering mechanism in detail and insist on applying the grease. My blood pressure is a touch high and I have an occasional extra-systole, so I take a pretty little orange pill four times a day."

Geoffrey Avalon, who sat immediately across the table, smiled with the self-conscious superiority of a man only moderately stricken in years who kept himself in good shape with a vigorous system of calisthenics and said, "How old are you, Mr. Smith?"

"Fifty-seven. With proper care, my doctor assures me I will live out a normal lifetime."

Emmanuel Rubin's eyes flashed in magnified form behind his thick spectacles as he said, "I doubt there's an American who reaches middle age these days who doesn't become accustomed to a regimen of pills of one kind or another. I take zinc and vitamin E and a few other things."

James Drake nodded and said in his soft voice as he peered through his cigarette smoke, "I have a special weekly pill-box

arrangement to keep the day's dosages correct. That way I can check on whether I've taken the second pill of a particular kind. If the pill is still in the Friday compartment — assuming the day is Friday — I know I haven't taken it."

Smith said, "I take only this one kind of pill, which simplifies things. I bought a week's supply three years ago — twenty-eight of them — on my doctor's prescription. I was frankly skeptical, but they did help me, so I persuaded my doctor to prescribe them for me in bottles of a thousand. Every Sunday morning I put twenty-eight pills into my original vial, which I carry with me everywhere and at all times and which I still use. I know at all times how much I should have — right now, I should have four left, having just taken the twenty-fourth of the week, and I do. In three years I've missed taking a pill only twice."

"I," said Rubin loftily, "have not yet reached that pitch of senility that requires any mnemonic devices at all."

"No?" asked Mario Gonzalo, spearing his last bit of baba au rhum. "What pitch of senility *have* you reached?"

Roger Halsted, who was hosting the banquet that night, forestalled Rubin's rejoinder by saying hastily, "There's an interesting point to be made here. As increasing numbers of people pump themselves full of chemicals, there must be fewer and fewer people with untampered tissue chemistry."

"None at all," growled Thomas Trumbull. "The food we eat is loaded with additives. The water we drink has purifying chemicals. The air we breathe is half pollution of one sort or another. If you could analyze an individual's blood carefully enough, you could probably tell where he lived, what he eats, and what medicines he takes."

Smith nodded. His short hair exposed prominent ears, something Gonzalo had taken full advantage of in preparing his caricature of the evening's guest. Now Smith rubbed one of them thoughtfully and said, "Maybe you could file everyone's detailed blood pattern in some computer bank. Then if all else fails, your blood would be your identification. The pattern would be entered into the computer which would compare it with all those in its memory files, and within a minute words would flash across a screen saying, 'The man you have here is John Smith of Fairfield, Connecticut,' and I would stand up and bow."

Trumbull said, "If you could stand up and bow, you could stand up and identify yourself. Why bother with a blood pattern?"

"Oh, yes?" said Smith grimly.

Halsted said, "Listen, let's not get involved in this. Henry is distributing the brandy and it's past time for the grilling. Jeff, will you

assume the task."

"I will be glad to," said Avalon in his most solemn tone.

Bending his fierce and graying eyebrows over his eyes, Avalon said, with incongruous mildness, "And just how do you justify your existence, Mr. Smith?"

"Well," said Smith cheerfully, "I inherited a going business. I did well with it, sold it profitably, invested wisely, and now live in early retirement in a posh place in Fairfield — a widower with two grown children, each on his own. I toil not, neither do I spin, and like the lilies of the field my justification is my beauty and the way it illuminates the landscape." A grin of self-mockery crossed his pleasantly ugly face.

Avalon said indulgently, "I suppose we can pass that. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Your name is John Smith?"

"And I can prove it," said Smith quickly. "I have my card, a driver's license, a variety of credit cards, some personal letters addressed lo me, a library card, and so on."

"I am perfectly willing to accept your word, sir, but it occurs to me that with a name like John Smith you must frequently encounter some signs of cynical disbelief — from hotel clerks, for instance. Do you have a middle initial?"

"No, sir, I am the real thing. My parents felt that any modification of the grand cliché would spoil the grandeur. I won't deny that there haven't been times when I've longed to say my name was Eustace Bartholomew Wasservogel, but the feeling passes. Of the Smiths I am, and of that tribe — variety, John — I remain."

Avalon cleared his throat portentously and said, "And yet, Mr. Smith, I think you have reason to feel annoyance at your name. You reacted to Tom's suggestion that you could merely announce your name and thus make the blood identification unnecessary with a clear tone of annoyance. Have you had some special occasion of late when you failed to identify yourself?"

Trumbull said, "Let me guess that you did. Your eagerness to demonstrate your ability to prove your identity would show that some past failure to do so rankles."

Smith stared round the table in astonishment, "Good God, does it show that much?"

Halsted said, "No, John, it doesn't, but this group has developed a sixth sense about mysteries. I told you when you accepted my invitation that if you were hiding a skeleton in your closet, they'd have it out of you."

"And I told you," said Smith, "that I had no mystery about me."

"And the matter of inability to prove your identity?" said Rubin.

"Was a nightmare rather than a mystery," said Smith, "and it is

something I've been asked not to talk about."

Avalon said, "Anything mentioned within the four walls of a Black Widower banquet represents privileged communication. Feel free to talk."

"I can't." Smith paused, then said, "Look, I don't know what it's all about. I think I was mistaken for someone once when I was visiting Europe, and after I got out of the nightmare I was visited by someone from the — by someone, and asked not to talk about it. Though come to think of it, there *is* a mystery of sort."

"Ah," said Avalon, "and what might that be?"

"I don't really know how I got out of the nightmare," said Smith.

Gonzalo, looking pleased and animated, said, "Tell us what happened and I'll bet we tell you how you got out of it."

"I can't very well—" began Smith.

Trumbull's frowning face, having attempted to wither Gonzalo, turned to Smith. "I understand such things, Mr. Smith," he said. "Suppose you omit the name of the country involved and the exact dates and any other such identifiable details. Just tell it as a story out of the Arabian Nights — if the nightmare will stand up without the dangerous details."

Smith said, "I think it will, but seriously, gentlemen, if the matter does involve national security — and I can imagine ways in which it might — how can I be sure you are all to be trusted?"

Halsted said, "If you trust me, John, I'll vouch for the rest of the Black Widowers — including, of course, Henry, our esteemed waiter."

Henry, standing at the sideboard, smiled gently.

Smith was visibly tempted. "I don't say I wouldn't like to get this off my chest—"

"If you choose not to," said Halsted, "I'm afraid the banquet ends. The terms of the invitation were that you were to answer all questions truthfully."

Smith laughed. "You also said I would not be asked anything designed to humiliate me or to put me in a disgraceful light — but have it your way."

I was visiting Europe last year [said Smith] and I'll put the location and date no closer than that. I was a recent widower, a little lost without my wife, and rather determined to pick up the threads of life once again. I had not been much of a traveler before my retirement and I was anxious to make up for that.

I traveled alone and I was a tourist. Nothing more than that. I want to stress that in all truthfulness. I was not serving any organ of the government — and that's true of *any* government, not just my own — either officially or unofficially. Nor was I there to gather

information for any private organization. I was simply a tourist and nothing more and so steeped in innocence that I suppose it was too much to expect that I would not get into trouble.

I could not speak the language of the country but that didn't bother me. I can't speak any language but English and I have the usual provincial American attitude that that's enough. There would always be *someone,* anywhere I might be, who would speak and understand English. And as a matter of fact, that always proved to be correct.

The hotel I stayed at was reasonably comfortable in appearance, though there was so foreign an aura about it that I knew I would not feel at home — but then I didn't expect to feel at home. I couldn't even pronounce its name, though that didn't bother me.

I only stayed long enough to deposit my luggage and then it was ho, for the great foreign spaces where I could really get to know the people.

The man at the desk — the concierge, or whatever he might be called — spoke an odd version of English that, with a little thought, could be understood. I got a list of tourist attractions from him, some recommended restaurants, a stylized map of the city — not in English, so I doubted it would do me much good — and some general assertions as to how safe the city was and how friendly the inhabitants were.

I imagine Europeans are always eager to impress that on Americans, who are known to live dangerously. In the 19th Century they thought every American city lay under imminent threat of Indian massacre; in the first half of the 20th Century every one was full of Chicago gangsters; and now they are all full of indiscriminate muggers. So I wandered off into the city cheerfully.

["Alone? Without knowing the language?" said Avalon, with manifest disapproval. "What time was it?"]

The shades of evening were being drawn downward by a cosmic hand and you're right in the implication, Mr. Avalon. Cities are never as safe as their boosters claim, and I found that out. But I started off cheerfully enough. The world was full of poetry and I was enjoying myself.

There were signs of all kinds on buildings and in store windows that were beginning to be lit up in defense against the night. Since I could read none of them, I was spared their deadly prosiness.

The people *were* friendly. I would smile and they would smile in return. Many said something — I presume in greeting — and I would smile again and nod and wave. It was a beautiful mild evening and I was absolutely euphoric.

I don't know how long I was walking or how far I had gone before I was quite convinced that I was lost, but even that didn't

bother me. I stepped into a tavern to ask my way to the restaurant where I had determined to go and whose name I had painstakingly memorized. I called out the name of the restaurant, pointed vaguely in various directions, shrugged, and tried to indicate that I had lost my way. Several people gathered around and one of them asked in adequate English if I were an American. I said I was and he translated that jubilantly to the others, who seemed delighted.

He said, "We don't see many Americans here." They then fell to studying my clothes and the cut of my hair and asking where I was from and trying to pronounce Fairfield and offering to stand me a drink. I sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* because they seemed to expect it and it was a real love feast. I did have a drink on an empty stomach and after that things got even love-feastier.

They told me the restaurant I asked for was very expensive, and not very good, and that I should eat right there and they would order for me and it would be on the house. It was hands across the sea and building bridges, you know, and I doubt if I had ever been happier since Regina had died. I had another drink, then another.

And then after that my memory stops until I found myself out in the street again. It was quite dark, much cooler. There were almost no people about, I had no idea where I was, and every idea that I had a splitting headache.

I sat down in a doorway and knew, even before I felt for it, that my wallet was gone. So was my wristwatch, my pens — in fact, my trousers pockets were empty and so were my jacket pockets. I had been Mickey Finned and rolled by my dear friends across the sea and they had probably taken me by car to a distant part of the city and dumped me.

The money taken was not vital. My main supply was safely back in the hotel. Still I had no money at the moment, I didn't know where I was, I didn't remember the name of the hotel, I felt woozy, sick, and in pain — and I needed help.

I looked for a policeman or for anyone in anything that looked like a uniform. If I had found a street cleaner, or a bus conductor, he could direct me or, better, take me to a police station.

I found a policeman. Actually, it wasn't difficult. They are, I imagine, numerous and deliberately visible in that particular city. And I was then taken to a police station — in the equivalent of a paddy-wagon, I think. My memory has its hazy spots.

When I began to remember a bit more clearly, I was sitting on a bench in what I guessed to be the police station. No one was paying much attention to me and my headache was a little better.

A rather short man with a large mustache entered, engaged in conversation with a man behind a massive desk, then approached me.

He seemed rather indifferent, but to my relief he spoke English and quite well, too, though he had a disconcerting accent.

I followed him into a rather dingy room, gray and depressing, and there the questioning began. It was the questioning that was the nightmare, though the questioner remained unfailingly, if distantly, polite. He told me his name but I don't remember it. I honestly don't. It began with a V, so I'll just call him Vee if I have to.

He said, "You say your name is John Smith."

"Yes."

He didn't exactly smile. He said, "It is a very common name in the United States and, I understand, is frequently assumed by those who wish to avoid investigation."

"It is frequently assumed *because* it is common," I said, "and since it is common, why shouldn't I be one of the hundreds of thousands who legitimately bear it."

"You have identification?"

"I've been robbed. I've come in to complain—"

Vee raised his hand and made hushing noises through his mustache. "Your complaint has been recorded, but I have nothing to do with the people here. They merely made sure you were not wounded and then sent for me. They have not searched you or questioned you. It is not their job. Now — do you have identification?"

Wearily, and quietly, I told him what had happened.

"Then," he said, "you have nothing with which to support your statement that you are John Smith of Fairfield, Connecticut?"

"Who else should I be?"

"That we would like to find out. You say you were mistreated in a tavern. Its location, please."

"I don't know."

"Its name?"

"I don't know."

"What were you doing there?"

"I told you. I was merely walking through the city—"

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. I told you."

"Your starting point?"

"My hotel."

"And you have identification there?"

"Certainly. My passport is there and all my belongings."

"The name of the hotel?"

I winced at that. Even to myself my answer would seem too much to accept. "I can't recall," I said in a low voice.

"Its location?"

"I don't know."

Vee sighed. He looked at me in a near-sighted way and I thought his eyes seemed sad, but perhaps it was only myopia.

He said, "The basic question is: What is your name? We must have some identification or this becomes a serious matter. Let me explain your position to you, Mr. Blank. Nothing compels me to do so, but I am not in love with every aspect of my work and I shall sleep better if I make sure you understand that you are in great danger."

My heart began to race. I am not young. I am not a hero. I am not brave. I said, "But why? I am a wronged person. I have been drugged and robbed. I came voluntarily to the police, sick and lost, looking for help—"

Again Vee held up his hand. "Quietly! Quietly! Some speak a little English here and it is better that we keep this between ourselves for now. Things may be as you have described, or they may not. You are an American national.

"My government has cause to fear Americans. That, at least, is our official position. We are expecting an American agent of great ability to penetrate our borders on a most dangerous mission.

"That means that any strange American — any American encountered under suspicious circumstances — has, for a week now, been referred instantly to my department. Your circumstances were suspicious to begin with and have grown far more suspicious now that I have questioned you."

I stared at him in horror. "Do you think *I'm* a spy? If I were, would I come to the police like this?"

"You may not be *the* spy, but you may still be *a* spy. There are people who will think so at once. Even I view it as a possibility."

"But *no* kind of spy would come to the police—"

"Please! It will do you good to listen. You may be a distraction. If you play chess, you will know what I mean when I say you may be a sacrifice. You are sent in to confuse and distract us, occupying our time and efforts, while the real work is being done elsewhere."

I said, "But it hasn't worked, if that's what I'm supposed to be. You're not confused and distracted. No one could be fooled by anything as silly as this. It's not a reasonable sacrifice and so it's no sacrifice at all. It's nothing but the truth I've been telling you."

Vee sighed, "Then what's your name?"

"John Smith. Ask me a million times and it will remain my name."

"But you can't prove it. — See here," he said, "you have two alternatives. One is to convince me in some reasonable way that you are telling the truth. Mere statements, however eloquent, are insufficient. There must be evidence. Have you nothing with your

name on it? Nothing material you can show me?"

"I told you," I said despairingly. "I've been robbed."

"Failing that," he said, as though he hadn't heard my remark, "it will be assumed you are here to fulfill some function for your country that will not be to the interest of my country, and you will be interrogated with that in mind. It will not be my job, I am glad to say, but those who interrogate will be most thorough and most patient. I wish it were not so, but where national security is at stake—"

I was in utter panic. I said, stuttering, "But I can't tell what I don't know, no matter how you interrogate."

"If so, they will finally be convinced, but you will not be well off by then. And you will be imprisoned, for it will not then be politic to let you go free in your condition. If your country succeeds in what it may be attempting, there will be anger in this country and you will surely be the victim of that and will receive a long sentence. Your country will not be able to intercede for you. It will not even try."

I screamed. "That is unjust! That is unjust!"

"Life *is* unjust," said Vee. "One of your own Presidents said that."

"But what am I to do?" I pleaded.

He said, "Convince me your story is true. Show me something! Remember something! Prove your name is John Smith. Take me to the tavern — better yet, to the hotel. Present me with your passport. Give me anything, however small, as a beginning, and I will have sufficient faith in you to try for the rest — at some risk to myself, I might add."

"I appreciate that, but I cannot. I am helpless. I cannot." I was babbling. All I could think of was that I was facing torture and an extended prison term for the crime of having been drugged and robbed. It was more than I could bear and I fainted. I'm sorry. It is not a heroic action, but I told you I wasn't a hero.

[Halsted said, "You don't know what they had put in your drink in the tavern. You were half poisoned. You weren't yourself."]

It's kind of you to say so, but the prospect of torture and imprisonment for nothing was not something I could face with stoicism on my best day.

The next memory I have is that of lying on a bed with a vague feeling of having been manhandled. I think some of my clothing may have been removed.

Vee was watching me with the same expression of sadness on his face. He said, "I'm sorry. Would you care for some brandy?"

I remembered. The nightmare was back. I shook my head. All I wanted was to convince him somehow of my utter innocence. I said, "Listen! You *must* believe me. Every word I have told you is true! I—"

He placed a hand on my shoulder and shook it. "Stop! I believe you."

I stared at him stupidly. “What?”

He said, “I believe you. For one thing, no one who was sent on a task such as yours might have been, could have portrayed utter terror so convincingly, in my opinion. But that is only my opinion. It would not have convinced my superiors and I could not have acted on it. However, no one could be as stupid as you have now proved to be without having been sufficiently stupid to step into a strange tavern so trustingly and to have forgotten the name of your hotel.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“Enough! I have wasted enough time. I should, properly, now leave you to the police, but I do not wish to abandon you just yet. For the tavern and the thieves within, I can do nothing now. Perhaps another time after another complaint. Let us, however, find your hotel. — Tell me anything you remember — the decor — the position of the registration desk — the hair color of the man behind it — were there flowers? Come, come, Mr. Smith, what kind of street was it on? Were there shops? Was there a doorman? Anything!”

I wondered if it were a scheme to trap me into something, but I saw no alternative but to try to answer the questions. I tried to picture everything as it had been when I had walked into the hotel for the first time less than twelve hours before. I did my best to describe it and he hurried me on impatiently, asking questions faster than I could answer.

He then looked at the hurried notes he had taken and whispered them to another official of some sort, who was on the spot without my having seen him enter — a hotel expert, perhaps. The newcomer nodded his head wisely and whispered back.

Vee said, “Very well, then. We think we know which hotel it was, so let us go. The faster I locate your passport, the better all around.”

Off we went in an official car. I sat there, fearful and apprehensive, fearing that it was a device to break my, spirit by offering me hope only to smash it by taking me to prison instead. God knows my spirit needed no breaking. — Or what if they took me to a hotel, and it was the wrong one, would they then listen to anything at all that I had to say?

We did, however, speed to a hotel. I shrugged helplessly when Vee asked if it was *the* hotel. How could I tell in pitch-darkness?

But it *was* the correct hotel. The night man behind the desk didn’t know me, of course, but there was the record of a room for a John Smith of Fairfield. We went up there and behold — my luggage, my passport, my papers. Quite enough.

Vee shook hands with me and said in a low voice, “A word of advice, Mr. Smith. Get out of the country quickly. I shall make my report and exonerate you, but if things go wrong in some ways,

someone may decide you should be picked up again. You will be better off beyond the borders."

I thanked him and never took anyone's advice so eagerly in all my life. I checked out of the hotel, took a taxi to the nearest station, and I don't think I breathed till I crossed the border.

To this day I don't know what it was all about — whether the United States really had an espionage project under way in that country at that time or whether, if we did, we succeeded or failed. As I said, some official asked me to keep quiet about the whole thing, so I suppose the suspicions of Vee's government were more or less justified.

In any case, I never plan to go back to that particular country.

Avalon said, "You were fortunate, Mr. Smith. I see what you mean when you said you were puzzled by the ending. Vee, as you call him, did make a sudden about-face, didn't he?"

"I don't think so," interposed Gonzalo. "I think he was sympathetic to you all along, Mr. Smith. When you passed oat, he called some superior, convinced him you were just a poor guy in trouble, and then let you go."

"It might be," said Drake, "that it was your fainting that convinced him. If you were actually an agent, you would know the dangers you ran, and you would be more or less steeled for them. In fact, he said so, didn't he? He said you couldn't fake fear so convincingly and therefore had to be what you said you were — something like that."

Rubin said, "If you've told the story accurately, Mr. Smith, I would think that Vee is out of sympathy with the regime or he wouldn't have urged you to get out of the country. I should think he stands a good chance of being purged, or has been since that time."

Trumbull said, "I hate to agree with you, Manny, but I do. My guess is that Vee's failure to hang on to Smith may have been the last straw."

"That doesn't make me feel very good." muttered Smith.

Roger Halsted pushed his coffee cup out of the way and placed his elbows on the table. He said earnestly, "I've heard the bare bones of the story before and I've thought about it and think there's more to it than that. Besides, if all five of you agree on something, it must be wrong."

He turned to Smith, "You told me, John, that this Vee was a young man."

"Well, he struck me as being in his early thirties."

"All right, then," said Halsted. "If a youngish man is in the secret police, it must be out of conviction and he must plan to rise in the

ranks. He isn't going to run ridiculous risks for some nonentity. If he were an old man, he might remember an earlier regime and might be out of sympathy with the new government, but—"

Gonzalo said, "How do you know this Vee wasn't a double agent? Maybe that's why our government doesn't want Smith to be talking about the matter."

"If Vee were a double agent," said Halsted, "then, considering his position in the government intelligence there, he would be enormously valuable to us. All the more reason that he wouldn't risk anything for the sake of a nonentity. I suspect that there's more than sympathy involved. He must have thought of something that authenticated John's story."

"Sometimes I think that's it," said Smith morosely. "I keep thinking of his remark after I came out of my faint to the effect that I was too stupid to be guilty. He never did explain that remark."

"Wait a minute," said Rubin. "After you came out of your faint, you said you seemed to be in disarray. While you were out, they inspected your clothes, realized they were American made—"

"What would that prove?" demanded Gonzalo. "An American spy is as likely to wear American clothes as an American tourist."

Mr. Smith said, "I bought the clothes I was wearing in Paris."

Gonzalo said, "I guess you didn't ask him why he thought you were stupid."

Smith snorted. "You mean did I say to him, 'Hey, wise guy, who're you calling stupid?' No, I didn't say that, or anything like it. I just held my breath."

Avalon said, "The comments on your stupidity, Mr. Smith, need not be taken to heart. You have said several times that you were not yourself at any time during that difficult time. After being drugged, you might well have *seemed* stupid. In any case, I don't see that we'll ever know the inwardness of Vee's change of mind. It would be sufficient to accept it and not question the favors of fortune. It is enough that you emerged safely from the lion's mouth."

"Well, wait," said Gonzalo. "We haven't asked Henry for his opinion yet."

Smith said, with astonishment, "The waiter?" Then, in a lower voice, "I didn't realize he was listening. Does he understand this is all confidential?"

Gonzalo said, "He's a member of the club and the best man here. — Henry, can you understand Vee's change of heart?"

Henry hesitated. "I do not wish to offend Mr. Smith. I would not care to call him stupid, but I can see why this foreign official, Vee, thought so."

There was a general stir about the table. Smith said stiffly, "What

do you mean, Henry?"

"You say the events of the nightmare took place some time last year."

"That's right," said Smith.

"And you say your pockets were rifled in the tavern. Were they completely emptied?"

"Of course," said Smith.

"But that is clearly impossible. You've said you still carry the original vial of pills, and that you have carried it everywhere and at all times, so that I suppose you had it with you when you traveled abroad and that you had it with you when you entered the tavern — and therefore still had it with you when you left the tavern."

Smith said, "Well, yes, you're right. It was in my shirt pocket as always. Either they missed it or decided they didn't want it."

"You didn't say anything about that in the course of the tale you have just told us."

"It never occurred to me."

"Nor did you tell Vee about it, I suppose?" said Henry.

"Look here," said Smith angrily. "I didn't think of it. But even if I did, I wouldn't voluntarily bring up the matter. They would use it to place a trumped-up charge of carrying dope against me and in that way justify an imprisonment."

"You'd be right, if you thought of the pills only, sir," said Henry.

"What else is there to think of?"

"The container," said Henry mildly. "The pills were available only by prescription and you told us it was the original vial. May we see it, Mr. Smith."

Smith withdrew it from his shirt pocket, glanced at it, and said vehemently, "Hell!"

"Exactly," said Henry. "On the label pasted to the vial by the pharmacist, there should be printed the pharmacist's name and address, probably in Fairfield, and *your* name should be typed in as well, together with directions for use."

"You're right."

"And after you had denied having any identification whatever on you, even in the face of torture, Vee looked through your pockets while you were unconscious and found exactly what he had been asking you to give him."

"No wonder he thought I was stupid," said Smith, shaking his head. "I *was* stupid. Now I *really* feel rotten."

"And yet," said Henry, "you have an explanation of something that has puzzled you for a year. That should make you feel good."

Won't Daddy Be Surprised?
by Clements Jordan

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> *"Mama, how much longer before we get to Ohio to Aunt Molly's house?"*

She left him on the bed, went into the bathroom, and applied a heavy coat of grease paint to the rapidly blackening bruise under her eye. She brushed her hair smooth. She must appear neat and calm. She removed her gown, and taking the car keys from the dresser went swiftly and quietly into the children's room, turning on only the night light. She dressed in jeans and dungarees and a long-sleeved T-shirt that hid the bruises on her arms. Dragging the already packed suitcase from the closet, she wrapped her gown in cleaner's plastic and squeezed that carefully into it. In the far corner was a pocketbook filled thoughtfully with hoarded money, driver's license, important papers, and odds and ends to amuse the children.

She went first to the boy's bed and roused him gently. "Come along, Dicky, let's play our game. Pleased and instantly awake, he put on his sneakers while she lifted the baby wrapped in her blanket. They left by the back door making no noise except the faint click as they closed the door behind them."

They went out to the street where the car was parked. First they laid the baby on the floor in the back, Dicky getting in beside her and holding the door nearly shut. She got in under the wheel and started the car, blessing the quiet motor, carefully holding the door open. She drove two blocks, turned the comer, and finally closed the door. Dicky closed his door and climbed over beside her.

"We're off!" she said gaily, switching on the lights.

Dicky laughed softly. "Won't Daddy be surprised if he wakes up?"

"He sure will," she answered, and added to herself, "So will I."

In her mind's eye she pictured having hit Ted with the plated candlestick just above the ear as he lay in drunken slumber. He hardly bled at all and only on the gown she had with her which she could dispose of easily miles away, maybe in pieces.

Peacefully they drove through the deserted streets. The baby slept in the back as though in her bed. Dicky amused himself counting stars, not minding that it was impossible to keep track. His head began to nod. She had to check to be sure he remembered. "Let me hear what you are going to say at the service station," she said.

"Mama, how much longer before we get to Ohio to Aunt Molly's house?"

"That's exactly right," she praised him, and allowed him to sag against her in sleep. Anyone looking for her would be seeking a woman with two children, not a woman with one child heading for Ohio which she was going nowhere near. She would drive to the airport where she would leave the car. In the bustling crowd she would dress the children in a restroom, then ride the airport bus to some bus station. She would somehow get the children to her folks in Oregon, hopefully before the body was found. She herself would depart for a place as yet unknown to herself. Maybe in a couple of years she could reclaim her children. Surely an experienced typist could find some job. She would take *anything!*

Tears blurred her vision as she thought how wonderful a friendly divorce would be, but the worst beating she had received was the time she had suggested that. "You just try to get me in court! Just *try!* I'll tell you-know-what."

She slowed up at one of the service stations she had found that stayed open day and night. She nudged Dicky to say his lines. As she handed the money through the window to the attendant, Dicky said, "Mama, how much longer before we get to Ohio to Aunt Molly's house?"

"A long time, darling," she answered for the attendant's benefit.

At the airport she lifted out the bag and the baby. She glanced at her watch, then hurried into the restroom. While Dicky brushed his teeth and washed his face, she did the same. She renewed her makeup, getting no notice at all. Last of all, she changed the baby and gave Dicky clean shorts and a clean T-shirt.

She found by checking her watch that they were ready to travel in less than half an hour. The angel baby still slept. They went out and she asked the departure time for the next airport bus. Due in thirty-five minutes. At the cafeteria she bought orange juice and hamburgers for herself and Dicky. They ate them in twenty minutes, taking their time, and reached the airport bus before it pulled away.

"Isn't this fun?" she demanded a little desperately.

Dicky, tired but cheerful, said it sure was.

They went back to the car and got in as before and started back home. Dicky cuddled up to her and went back to sleep. The baby had never actually awakened. She drove along, thinking and rethinking. She had been so trusting, so in love when she married Ted, and hadn't known how badly he drank and how mean he became while drinking. Her greatest mistake, however, had been confiding to him that she had taken money during a bookkeeping job. She had never been discovered. He was the only one who knew.

Hitting Ted with the candlestick would probably not work. She must think of something else. She knew she would, and soon. She had learned a lot. After she got rid of him, she was going to buckle down, work hard, be a good person.

Before she got too close to the house, she stopped at another service station and filled the tank to its original level, this time at a self-service station. She got back in and awoke Dicky, cautioning him to be very quiet and warning him to secrecy, for if he told, they could never play the game again. Dicky was hurt. Had he told? His mother's eyes were pleading, so thinking of the cool starry ride, the airport full of swooping planes, the delicious night feast, Dicky promised cross-his-heart.

They coasted the last half block, left the car silently, and closed the car doors quietly. They entered the back door, groped into the children's room where she took her gown and Dickie's pajamas out of the suitcase. They put them back on, repacking Dicky's outfit. She pushed the suitcase and pocketbook to the back of the closet, placing all the empty luggage in front of them. Dicky and the baby were now deeply asleep.

She washed her face again, her lips tightening and sparks of anger snapping in her eyes at the sight of her bruised face. She would pay him back! She glanced at her watch. The whole rehearsal had taken under four hours. It was still dark outside.

She eased into bed where Ted snored unaware. In a few hours he would wake, gather her into his arms, kiss her bruises, and apologize glibly. "I'm so sorry, honey. You know I'd never hurt you if I was myself. I'm really going to stop drinking. Honest, I am. Say you forgive your old monster."

She would swallow the bitterness in her throat and answer, "Sure, Teddie, I know you're sorry. It's okay, lover. Everything will be better, you'll see."

Mr. Strang Unlocks a Door *by* William Brittain

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A new Mr. Strang story by William Brittain

Mr. Leonard Strang, the amateur criminologist of Aldershot High School, has been absent from our pages for more than three years. No, he hasn't retired; the wizened, gnome-like science teacher has been on a long sabbatical — away from classrooms and crimes. And now he's back, confronting an academic problem that has tormented teachers since time immemorial...

It was the thirtieth of May, and the sunshine was bright outside the office window. There hadn't been a parental complaint in nearly a week; an incipient food fight in the cafeteria had been averted by the simple expedient of putting pizza back on the menu; and the school's baseball team had won its last four games in a row. For Marvin W. Guthrey, principal of Aldershot High School, life was good. With a contented sigh he snuggled against the smooth leather of his high-backed swivel chair.

The office door flew open with a loud bang. In the opening stood the small rumpled figure of Mr. Leonard Strang, Aldershot's veteran science teacher. He held some papers in one hand, and the other fist was tightly clenched. On the gnomelike teacher's face was an expression of total outrage.

Mr. Strang had been at Aldershot High School for thirty-three years — sixteen more than Guthrey himself. And in all that time he'd been a stickler for politeness, for observing the amenities of civilized behavior. So Guthrey knew that for Mr. Strang to come barging unceremoniously into the principal's office spelled trouble with a capital T.

"Leonard," said the principal solicitously. "What's wrong?"

"I am annoyed!" replied Mr. Strang. "More than that, I am provoked, irritated, and incensed! In all my years of teaching I have never seen such a brazen attempt—"

He stopped abruptly and made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

“In!” he ordered.

Two boys slunk silently into the office. Guthrey recognized both of them. Arthur Osgood was scarcely an inch taller than Mr. Strang himself. In his green jacket, and peering about through large bulbous eyes, Arthur Osgood put the principal in mind of a myopic frog. By contrast, Ralph Milleridge was a colossus, his muscles rippling beneath a sweatshirt with *ALDERSHOT ATHLETICS* stenciled on it.

“Sit down!” ordered Mr. Strang. The two boys sat. The teacher looked across the desk at the astounded Mr. Guthrey.

“Today,” began Mr. Strang, “I collected the research papers from my advanced biology class. The papers were assigned last September and represent a full year’s work. Much of the final mark for the year is based on—”

“Okay, okay,” said Guthrey. “What’s the problem?”

“I glanced through the papers at lunch,” the teacher replied. “Take a look at this.” He placed a small pile of papers on Guthrey’s desk.

“It seems Arthur wrote about cloning,” said the principal. “Let me see... ‘To the average person, the word clone brings to mind images of huge monsters or zombie-like humanoids designed to do the bidding of their masters.’ ” Guthrey looked up. “Not bad so far, Leonard.”

Mr. Strang began reading from the top page of the papers still in his hand. “ ‘It should be understood, however, that at present, cloning — the use of a single cell from a living organism to produce an exact genetic duplicate of the donor — is limited to—”

Guthrey frowned and pointed to the paper on his desk. “That’s exactly what this one says, Leonard.”

“Yes,” replied the teacher. “It seems one of these two papers is itself a clone. They’re identical from beginning to end. Fourteen pages of solid research by one of these boys. And of cheating by the other.”

“But which—” Guthrey began.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” answered Mr. Strang. “I’ll probably have to fail the cheater, and as this is a class for seniors only, he may not graduate. I thought the problem was serious enough to bring to your attention.”

“Of course,” said Guthrey. “But because it is so serious, we have to be absolutely sure who the guilty party is.”

There was a long silence. Then Arthur Osgood spoke up. “I–I know how things look, Mr. Strang,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “But that paper’s all my own work. I swear—”

“Hey, Artie,” interrupted Ralph Milleridge. “C’mon, man! You tried a little scam, and it didn’t work. Didn’t you think anybody would see that your paper’s just like the one I wrote?”

Mr. Strang and Guthrey looked at each other. The answer they

were searching for wasn't going to be found easily — if indeed it was found at all.

"Both papers typed," murmured Mr. Strang. "Footnotes — bibliography — all identical. They were done on different machines. The quality of your typing seems to be much better than Arthur's, Ralph."

"My father's got an office at home," said Ralph. "With a computer and everything. All the latest equipment. Including one of those typewriters with a TV screen where you can correct any mistakes and then the machine makes a perfect copy. But just because Dad let me use his office doesn't mean—"

"It isn't neatness we're concerned with here," said Mr. Strang. "It's honesty. Tell me, Ralph, when did you finish your paper?"

"About three weeks ago. It was the day of the game against Bentley High. I remember because I pitched that day."

Guthrey consulted his calendar. "That would be May tenth — a Saturday."

"And you?" Mr. Strang asked Arthur.

"Last weekend. Sunday afternoon."

"You see," said Ralph. "My paper was finished two weeks ahead of Artie's. So he had to copy from me."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Strang. "I don't suppose either of you has some kind of proof — aside from your unsupported word — that you completed the paper when you said you did."

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes?" Mr. Strang peered at Ralph Milleridge over the tops of his black-rimmed glasses. "You can *prove* you finished your paper on May tenth, Ralph?"

"I sure can. I mailed myself a copy."

"You what?"

"I sealed a carbon copy of my paper in an envelope and mailed it to myself. Dad does that sometimes when he writes something and he doesn't want anybody else to steal his idea. The postmark tells when you did the work. Here, I'll show you."

Ralph leafed through the notebook in his lap. Finally he came up with a 9 x 12 inch brown manila envelope. He handed it to Mr. Strang.

"Looks like the flap is sealed with tape," said Guthrey.

"Sealed? It's practically bound and gagged." The teacher examined the shiny strips that crisscrossed one another over the envelope's flap. "And the tape's got glass fibers running through it. The adhesive's strong, and the tape itself can't be broken. You would have to cut it. This flap hasn't been tampered with, that's for sure."

He turned the envelope over. In addition to Ralph Milleridge's name and address, the message *First Class Mail* was printed and underlined.

"The stamp cancellation seems to be in order," muttered Mr. Strang, peering closely at it. "Part of the postmark is smudged where it printed onto a strip of tape that was folded over the edge of the envelope. But it was mailed in Aldershot, all right."

"The date, Leonard," said Guthrey impatiently. "What's the postmark date?"

"May thirteenth."

"You see," said Ralph. "The tenth was a Saturday. I mailed this late the following Monday, after school. So it got postmarked the next day — Tuesday, the thirteenth."

Without replying, Mr. Strang picked up a long pair of scissors from Guthrey's desk. With some difficulty he worked the point under the layers of tape sealing the flap. Cutting through both tape and flap, he opened the end of the envelope.

Inside was a small sheaf of papers — a carbon copy of Ralph Milleridge's work. The teacher removed the first page, glanced at it, and shook his head sadly.

"Read it, Leonard," ordered Guthrey. "Read it out loud."

" 'To the average person, the word clone brings to mind images of huge monsters or..."

Guthrey turned to Arthur Osgood. "You've already admitted you didn't finish your paper until this past weekend, Arthur," he said. "That's about ten days after this was mailed. It's pretty evident that you must have copied Ralph's work. As a result I'm forced to—"

"No! I didn't cheat!" And with a loud cry Arthur Osgood ran out of the office.

Driving home through the peaceful streets of Aldershot that afternoon, Mr. Strang growled angrily at himself, and the pipe between his clenched teeth emitted clouds of foul-smelling smoke. Arthur had cheated, that was evident. The sealed envelope containing Ralph Milleridge's carbon copy and dated May thirteenth was proof beyond all question.

Still, Mr. Strang had doubts. Why, for example, had Ralph mailed himself a copy of his paper in the first place? And why would he carry the envelope with him into the principal's office? It was almost as if he expected someone to copy his work. Or else—

The teacher swung the wheel sharply, drove two blocks out of his way, and stopped at the Aldershot post office. The postmaster, Dewey Langdon, was a former pupil of Mr. Strang's, and he greeted the teacher jovially.

“Hi, Professor. Read any good books lately?” And Langdon laughed loudly.

Mr. Strang smiled — a bit grimly, perhaps — and put the first of his questions.

“Dewey, are you acquainted with a boy named Ralph Milleridge?”

“Sure. He’s in here from time to time. Darnedest thing, now that I think of it. He was in here a few weeks back, mailing a letter to himself.”

“Oh? What did it look like?” asked the teacher.

“One of those big brown envelopes. The flap was taped down real good as if there was something valuable inside. I weighed it in and gave Ralph fifty-four cents in stamps. Four ounces, first class mail. He stuck the stamps on the envelope and mailed the thing. That’s about it.”

“Fifty-four cents? You remember that?”

“Sure do. One of the quarters he gave me was Canadian. I had to ask him for a U.S. quarter — that’s why I remember the incident. Something else I can do for you, Mr. Strang? We’ve got a bargain in fifteen-cent stamps today. Two for thirty cents.” And again Dewey’s hoarse laugh rang out in the small post office.

“No, Dewey. But I appreciate the information.”

So much for the theory that the tape had been added after the envelope was delivered, thought the teacher as he drove off.

Mrs. Mackey, the owner of the house where Mr. Strang rented a small second-floor room, was out when he got home. She’d left a note saying that she was visiting her nephew and wouldn’t be home until late. So, as the teacher sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of canned soup and watching the sunset through the rear window, he was surprised to hear the front door softly open and then close.

“Who’s there?” he called out.

There was a rustling sound from the living room. Mr. Strang went to investigate. At first he saw nothing. But then he spotted the dim figure sitting in a gloomy corner. He snapped on the lights.

“Arthur Osgood, what are you doing here?” asked the teacher in surprise.

Arthur, red-eyed and with tears streaming down his cheeks, spoke in a high reedy voice. “Don’t get mad, Mr. Strang. The doorbell didn’t work, and the front door was unlocked, and — and I just came in.”

Mr. Strang went to the door and shot the inside bolt. Then he turned to Arthur again. “You just don’t walk into people’s houses unannounced and take a seat,” he said. He was about to go on when the distraught expression on Arthur’s face silenced him.

“But I had to see you, Mr. Strang. I wouldn’t ever — I didn’t—”

Mr. Strang sat down opposite the boy. “Arthur,” he began, “I

don't know what to tell you. All year long I've stressed the importance of that paper to your final grade. Why did you have to—"

"But I didn't, Mr. Strang. I swear I didn't cheat! And now I'm not going to graduate and — and—"

"Arthur, you'll graduate. You have enough credits, even without my class. Maybe I came on a bit strong in Mr. Guthrey's office, but you'll graduate. Does that make you happy?"

"No, sir. It doesn't."

"No? Then what is it you want?"

"I–I don't want to leave school with you thinking I cheated on any of my work, Mr. Strang."

For a moment the old teacher felt as if someone had jabbed him in the solar plexis. In the long silence that followed, tears welled up in his own eyes. He blinked them back and looked at the blurred figure of Arthur Osgood.

"Does my esteem really mean that much to you?" Mr. Strang asked softly.

The boy nodded.

"As I live and breathe," muttered the teacher to himself. "In this day and age, to find a young person who values the good opinion of others — remarkable! The era of Being Cool and Doing Your Own Thing still has a few kids who put reputation above all else. Remarkable indeed."

"Huh?" said the boy.

"Nothing," replied Mr. Strang, with a shake of his head. "Nothing, Arthur. But for what it's worth I believe you. In spite of the evidence. I don't think you copied Ralph's paper. Anyone who did something like that wouldn't come calling the way you did this evening."

"Thanks, Mr. Strang. It means a lot to me." Arthur let out a long sigh. "But I guess everybody else will figure I cheated anyway."

"I suppose they will." But then Mr. Strang pounded the arm of his chair viciously. "No, confound it! If you didn't cheat, then Ralph Milleridge did. And he came up with that envelope gimmick to prove his innocence when the two papers were discovered. The question is, how did he manage it?"

For several moments both teacher and student pondered the problem. Could the flap have been tampered with in some way? No, Mr. Strang was sure that was impossible, especially in light of what Dewey Langdon had told him. Could a duplicate envelope have been used somehow, or the postmark forged? In fiction perhaps, but not by a high-school student in real life.

"All right, Arthur," said Mr. Strang finally. "Let's start at the beginning. Is there any way Ralph could have got a look at your work?"

Arthur thought about this. “I don’t see how,” he said. “I mean, we were both doing papers on cloning, so we talked about the references we were using and stuff like that. But the only time I took my paper out of the house was—”

“Was when, Arthur?”

“It was last Monday. I was all finished, but I wanted to check one or two books in the school library against what I’d written. So I brought the paper to school, and—”

“And what?” Mr. Strang could barely restrain his impatience.

“Ralph was all done, he told me. But he wanted to have a look at a book on cloning I had at my house. So we walked home together.”

“Did he ever see your paper? Even for a minute?”

“I don’t see how he could. It was in my notebook the whole time. On the way home we stopped off at Ralph’s so he could get some notes. While he went for them, I waited in the kitchen. Mrs. Milleridge gave me a cupcake.”

“Aha! And where was your notebook then?”

“On a chair in the living room where we’d left our coats.”

“Better and better,” said Mr. Strang, rubbing his hands. “So while you were in the kitchen, Arthur could have taken your paper and written out—”

“Hey, Mr. Strang! We were only in the house for about five minutes. Just long enough for Ralph to get his notes. He wouldn’t have had time to read my paper, much less write out a copy.”

“Oh.” The teacher’s triumphant smile faded.

“Then we went on to my house. I found the book, and Ralph asked if he could borrow it. So I let him. He took it home. But he forgot to take the rest of his stuff. I had to bring it to school the next day.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mr. Strang. “You mean to say that Ralph Milleridge left *his* notebook at *your* house overnight?”

“Sure, but—”

“Ouch!” The teacher made a wry face. “Not good, Arthur.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said that Ralph couldn’t have copied your paper. But you’ve also told me that you had access to his books — and presumably his research paper — for at least twelve hours. You’d have had plenty of time to copy his—”

“But I didn’t, Mr. Strang. I didn’t.” Fresh tears sparkled in Arthur’s eyes.

“All right, Arthur, all right. But you can see how bad it looks for you. You had an opportunity to copy Ralph’s paper. And then there’s that confounded envelope. Ciliata! If I could find out how that was managed, I’d—”

The sound of a doorknob being rattled came from the kitchen. Mr. Strang lifted his head, wondering who'd be trying the rear door. Then a key was inserted and the lock snapped back. "Who's there?" called the teacher as the door creaked open.

"And who d'ye think'd be cornin' callin' at this hour o' the night?" Mrs. Mackey's rich Irish brogue carried with it hints of the green fields of Kilkenny and peat fires glowing in small cottages. "Seems only right I should be allowed entrance into me own house." She waddled into the living room, her ruddy, smiling face belying her stern words.

"But why didn't you come in the front way as you always do?" Mr. Strang asked.

"Because some fool bolted the door on the inside so even with my key it wouldn't open. You wouldn't have no idea how the door got bolted, would you, Mr. Strang?"

The teacher's face reddened. "I'm afraid I'm guilty as charged, Mrs. Mackey," he said. "When Arthur came in—"

"Ah, ye've got a guest. Yer pardon for disturbin' you. No harm done. 'Twas no trouble coming in the rear way. I'll be off to bed now. Help yerselves to what's in the fridge." And with that Mrs. Mackey ponderously climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Mr. Strang looked after her, his face blank. Then he turned back to Arthur. "Did you hear what she said?" he asked.

"Sure," Arthur replied. "She said she was going to bed."

"No, no. Before that."

"She was bawling you out for bolting the door and making her come in through the kitchen. But I don't see what that's got to do with —"

"But that's it. Of course! That has to be it."

"What has to be what, Mr. Strang?"

Mr. Strang rose stiffly from his chair and extended a hand. "Arthur," he said dramatically, "I hereby pronounce you innocent of any wrongdoing in regard to your research paper."

"But how could Ralph—"

"Not now," the teacher replied. "When I explain what really happened with those papers, I want young Mr. Milleridge in the room. Just so I can see the look on that young rascal's face!"

The following Tuesday, Mr. Guthrey called a meeting after school in his office. Those attending included Mr. Strang, Arthur Osgood, and Ralph Milleridge. When all were present, Mr. Guthrey dismissed his secretary and closed the office door.

"Mr. Strang says he's gotten to the bottom of this term-paper business," said the principal from his exalted position at the head of the large conference table. "So I'll turn the — er — program over to

him."

"What's going to happen to Artie?" asked Ralph. "Look, you're not going to be too hard on him, are you?"

"Nothing's going to happen to Arthur," replied Mr. Strang. "For the simple reason that he's done nothing to deserve punishment."

"Didn't do anything?" cried Ralph. "He stole my paper, didn't he?"

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph," sighed Mr. Strang with a shake of his head. "This won't do. It really won't. Why not own up now to what you've done and save us all a lot of trouble?"

"I haven't done anything. And I can prove it. The envelope—"

"Yes, yes," said the teacher. "Similar to this one, wasn't it?" From his briefcase he removed a brown manila envelope. "Sold at Pen and Ink Stationery here in Aldershot? Nine-by-twelve size?"

"Yes, that's the kind I used."

"Good. Then perhaps you'll indulge me while I perform a little demonstration."

Mr. Strang removed his black-rimmed glasses from his pocket and put them on with a flourish. Over the years, thousands of his students had seen him make this same gesture in the classroom just before an experiment was about to be started.

"Here, an envelope similar to the one Ralph mailed his paper in." Again Mr. Strang reached into his briefcase. "And here, a sheet of blank paper. Will you place it in the envelope, Ralph? And seal the flap, please?"

The paper was inserted. Ralph Milleridge licked the flap of the envelope and bent the metal fastener up. Then he pressed down the flap carefully, finally locking it in place with the fastener.

"Still not good enough," declared Mr. Strang, reaching for the briefcase once more. This time it yielded a roll of plastic tape.

"Just like the stuff you used, Ralph. Go ahead. Seal up the envelope with it. The same way you did with the other one."

Mr. Guthrey furnished a small penknife with which the tape was cut into short lengths. When Ralph finished flattening it into place, the flap was proof against anything short of a sharp pair of shears.

"Now, Mr. Guthrey, would you please draw a stamp right where the one was on the other envelope? That's it, just opposite the flap. Make your sketch as ornate as you like. Something you'll recognize when you see it again. Even put your initials on it. Ah, that's fine."

Mr. Strang produced another sheet of paper. "Finally," he said, "I'd like each of you to make some identifying marks on this. Sign your names or put down anything else you like. Just so you'll know this paper when next it appears."

When this was completed, Mr. Strang took the sealed envelope

and the paper, which now had three signatures scrawled across it, and got up from his place. “I must ask your indulgence for about ten minutes,” he announced. “At the end of that time the demonstration will be completed.” And before anyone could comment, he left the office.

In less than ten minutes he returned. The envelope, still tightly sealed, was in his hand. The signed paper was nowhere in sight.

“Here,” said the teacher dramatically, “is your envelope, Mr. Guthrey. Will you verify that it has the stamp you drew on it and initialed?”

“Why, yes,” said the principal. “That’s it, all right. But—”

“Now will you open it, please? That penknife should do the trick.”

With the small knife Guthrey hacked his way through the layers of tape. Finally he made an opening clear across the end of the envelope.

“Now remove what’s inside,” said Mr. Strang, leaning forward like a cat about to pounce on its prey.

“Leonard, it’s got to be the blank paper we put in — good lord!” Slowly Guthrey drew the paper from the envelope. On one side were three signatures. Ralph Milleridge’s. Arthur Osgood’s. And Marvin W. Guthrey’s.

“How — how did you—” Guthrey sputtered.

“First, will you agree that within reason I’ve duplicated what went on here last Friday?”

“Of course. But — but how did you unseal that flap?”

“The flap,” said Mr. Strang with the chuckle. “That glued-down, clamped-down, taped-down flap. The one part of the envelope which, with its adhesive trappings, got all our attention. It’s so obviously the only entrance into our miniature locked room. I admit, I was as taken with it as any of you. At least until my landlady, Mrs. Mackey, said something that cleared up the whole thing.”

“What was it?” asked Guthrey. “What did she say?”

“She came in through the back door the other evening after I’d bolted the front one. ‘Twas no trouble coming in the rear way,’ she told me.”

“I still don’t understand, Leonard.”

“When she said that, Mr. Guthrey, it suddenly occurred to me that the envelope has a kind of ‘rear way,’ too.”

“Huh?”

“Yes. You see, it doesn’t have just one flap. It has two.”

“Two?”

“Of course. The one that’s so tightly sealed was what we paid all our attention to. A bit like a magician waving one hand wildly to attract his audience’s attention while he palms a coin with the other.

“But at the other end of the envelope is another, smaller flap. Oh, it’s glued shut, but otherwise unprotected. And with the application of a little water or steam the glue loosens quite easily. Anything can then be removed through the ‘back door’.” Mr. Strang looked sternly at Ralph Milleridge. “And anything else inserted. When the small flap’s glued shut again, there’s no evidence of tampering. Especially if you go over the flap with a hot iron, as I did down in the home economics room.”

“Well, I’ll be—”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Ralph Milleridge rose to his feet. “Okay, Mr. Strang, it could have been done that way. But that isn’t saying it was what happened. I mean, how could I have gotten a look at Artie’s paper in the first place?”

“Simple. He was at your house, wasn’t he? With his books in the living room while he ate a cupcake in the kitchen?”

“Yeah, for maybe five minutes. But I didn’t have time to copy—”

“Oh, stop it, Ralph! You talk about copying as if you were one of the ancient scriveners, writing everything down in longhand. Yet you yourself spoke of your father’s home office. With an ultramodern typewriter, and even a computer.”

“Yeah, but the typewriter and the computer couldn’t—”

“Surely, Ralph, such a place would also have some kind of copying apparatus.”

The look on Ralph Milleridge’s face told Mr. Strang that his shot had struck home. He pressed the advantage.

“In five minutes with such a machine you could have copied fifty to a hundred pages. A mere fourteen would have been nothing. Afterward, your leaving your books at Arthur’s overnight could have been an accident. On the other hand, it might have been a deliberate attempt to throw suspicion on him by giving him ample time to copy your non-existent paper.”

“You — you—” Arthur Osgood glared at Ralph, furious. He started to rise, but Guthrey urged him back into his chair.

“I’ve seen it happen before,” Mr. Strang told Ralph. “A student lets the days turn into weeks and then months with no work done on a major project. Suddenly it’s spring and there are all sorts of interesting things to be done. Yet the research paper looms large. With only a month or so to go, you had to come up with something. So you mailed the envelope three weeks ago with blank sheets in it and then just sat back and waited your chance to get at Arthur’s paper. A little talk around school about the imaginary ‘work’ you were doing on your paper would be enough to impress everyone with your studious ways.”

Ralph Milleridge was shaken but still not ready to admit to Mr.

Strang's charges. "You can't prove anything," he whispered.

"Unfortunately, I can, Ralph," the teacher replied. "There are two things you overlooked. Understandable in something as complicated as this.

"First, there's the matter of the references you supposedly used. I checked 'em out in the school library. There are seven books in your bibliography. Of those you checked out three last month, according to the book cards. Getting your story in proper form, were you?"

"No, I—"

"The other four were dated just a week ago today — weeks after you'd supposedly completed your paper. And one day after you'd had a chance to copy Arthur's work. The inference is clear — you'd seen Arthur's bibliography and you wanted to look at those books in case anybody questioned you about your paper."

The effect on Ralph Milleridge was shattering. The large boy seemed to shrink visibly. "I–I had to do something," he almost sobbed. "My folks would have killed me. What am I going to do, Mr. Strang? What am I going to do?"

Mr. Strang walked behind Ralph's chair and patted the boy gently on the shoulder. "Come and see me tomorrow," he said. "We'll talk about it. Maybe we can work something out."

Later, when the two boys had left the office, Guthrey gazed at Mr. Strang with an awed expression. "Leonard?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Guthrey?"

"You said there were two things Ralph had overlooked in his plan. One was the library books. But what was the second?"

"I was saving that in case he still maintained his innocence." Mr. Strang shook his head sadly. "But heaven help me, I broke him. Is the second thing really important now?"

"No, I suppose not. Just curiosity on my part."

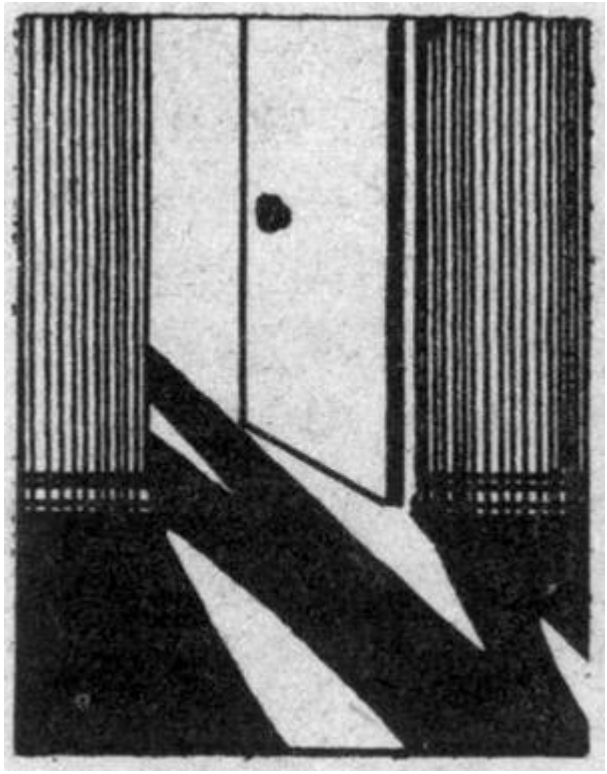
"It was the weight of the envelope," said Mr. Strang. "Ralph had to send the envelope through the mail before he'd seen Arthur's paper. So he put in too many blank sheets. First class mail, fifty-four cents — that's one fifteen-cent stamp and three thirteens — four ounces. But the fourteen pages of the research paper, plus the envelope, came to only something over two ounces, so Ralph should only have had to pay for three — forty-one cents. I checked the weight of the paper this morning. Dewey Langdon weighed it for me."

"That's rather weak, Leonard," chided Guthrey. "Mr. Langdon could have made a mistake."

Mr. Strang shook his head. "Not Dewey. Even as a student he was meticulous. Of all the kids I've taught over the years he's one of the few I could trust never to make an error like that. Especially where money was involved."

The teacher jammed his felt hat onto his head. “I really can’t take much pleasure in what I’ve done today,” he said. “Ralph Milleridge’s scheme had to be exposed, of course. But to do it I had to break the boy in the same way a fine wild horse is broken to the saddle. I just hope Ralph’s got enough backbone in him to put the pieces back together again.

“I have a bitter taste in my mouth right now, Mr. Guthrey. Perhaps a good stiff brandy will remove it. And you’re buying.”



Nursery Crime: III
by Kathleen Hershey

Detectiverse

© 1981 by Kathleen Hershey

Any farmer will tell you, if I'm not mistaken,
The Three Little Pigs were raised to be bacon.
They were spared, as you know, and controlled real estate,
But those dastardly ingrates were filled with such hate
They locked out their guest who climbed down the flue,
Fell into their kettle, and — presto — wolf stew.

How Does Your Garden Grow?
by Anthony Bloomfield

© 1981 by Anthony Bloomfield

> *"So he had to live with the rosebushes forever... until he died, when it would no longer matter"...*

Three years now, and still each time he leaves or enters the house he must look first down the back garden, to the end by the alley, by the wall, where the rosebushes are planted And while he is in the house he will from time to time stop whatever he is doing to go to one of the rear windows; last thing before bed also; and most urgently of all, as soon as it becomes light in the morning.

In three years, from the time he planted the roses, they've never been disturbed in any way. Once he'd had the back gate removed and walled up, and the dividing fence with his neighbor reinforced, it was almost impossible for a dog to get in. Of course there is no way you can keep out the cats. Even the birds pecking frightened him a little, but now he can accept the birds, at least in his mind, although he still shoos them off. But he does that furtively, in case his neighbors consider it peculiar.

Up to a point he is prepared to acknowledge that he's a prisoner of his imagination, while remaining, however, prisoner in a more literal sense. The house, or the back garden, is his cell. That's why he twice had to turn down offers of good promotion, which would have entailed moving. That's why he had taken no holiday, not even a weekend away, until, with it growing easier, this summer he'd booked to Jersey for a fortnight. And even then he'd found it necessary to return before the end of the first week.

And the house, the back garden, the rosebushes are why he hasn't married; why, he believes, he can never marry. Not to mention, at a lower level of deprivation, the impossibility of having a cleaning woman in any more, so that he has to look after the house, the garden, look after himself, all by himself. At his age, with his position, he realizes this lifestyle makes him appear a little eccentric, and that too is dangerous, but it's a risk he sees no way of avoiding.

Additionally, there was little or nothing he could do to avert the consequences of any natural disasters that might take place. The floods had been a bad time, when the river had crested its banks, and a lot of land and private gardens had been washed away; but luckily the floods had receded before reaching his property. Early on, even

heavy rains had alarmed him so much he had to get up every hour of the night. Unfortunately, he was unable to discover where the various pipes ran, and still couldn't stop himself from picturing the possible outcome if a waterpipe burst or there was a gas explosion.

In his mind he had foreseen, and in his imagination suffered over and over every possible eventuality.

But he is growing a little more confident all the time. Along with the rosebushes, the other irreducible obsession had been the doorbell. He invariably looked out before answering, but you couldn't always see who was there. Then sometimes, although recognizing the futility of evasion, he had been simply physically incapable of opening the door. And if there were two men standing at the door, as two men would appear in his nightmares or in his daytime imaginings, large and raincoated, he ran and locked himself in the bathroom. But six months ago — at the local elections, it was — two men had called, and he'd forced himself to go down and open, so that afterward, although it was true even at first glance they weren't the type, he felt the triumph that comes from having surmounted a hitherto impossible hurdle.

He'd also discovered strength to give up his obsessive specialized reading. He'd begun by getting the books from the public library, but considered it might look odd, then he bought them in another town nearby, burning them as soon as he had digested the relevant material. Anyway, from none of them, neither the works in Natural History, nor the biographies, autobiographies, and books of memoirs, had he been able to derive any substantial reassurance. What's more, you had to remember science was developing all the time. And some items were non-organic.

During even the worst time, at the beginning, when he had often believed he would not be able to last out, vestiges of self-control had saved him from seeking the support of sleeping pills or tranquilizers or alcohol. Now, while taking the occasional drink again, he remains careful not to get into a condition where the guards posted on his tongue and all his movements might even momentarily relax their watchfulness. Besides, he couldn't forget the alcohol factors three years ago.

On his one holiday the girl he had taken, the first girl for three years, had mocked him for his sobriety. She'd laughed at him too for asking her whether he ever talked in his sleep. He couldn't say it had been a success, especially after his insistence on returning early; and they hadn't met since. But just to have done it was a mark of progress of sorts, as well as having removed a doubt about himself arising from what had happened then. Laid a ghost, as he put it, with regained capacity for a kind of simple humor.

So all in all he thinks he may at last be getting over it; not only that he may stay safe forever, but also that within himself he will come to admit his security, and, accepting necessary limitations, survive.

One fear that at the beginning had been as demanding as the roses and the doorbell had vanished altogether. After three years it stood to reason — and even the dark unreasoning depths of his mind acknowledged this — that no one would be coming forward now to say they saw him in the pub, or they saw her getting into his car, or they heard and saw them laughing and kissing as they entered the house.

So now it was really just down to the rosebushes, and what lay underneath. Of course, not a day, scarcely an hour, went by without the bitterness of self-reproach twisting his intestines. The madness of it. When he could have put her, it, in the trunk compartment of his car and dumped it miles away.

The drink he'd consumed had a lot to do with it, the drink that may have weakened him, and made her laugh. The drink that loosened his control, fueled his humiliated rage. That stopped him realizing how long, how hard he pressed. And then, although shock too was no doubt involved, stopped him thinking straight.

The memory of it now brought out a cold sweat in him every time. In the darkness, in the rain, digging. He'd not even known until afterward that his neighbors were away for the weekend. But still, anyone — a patrolling policeman, late rain-careless lovers in the alley... And throwing everything in — clothes, handbag, her jewelry, all that was indissoluble; that would lie identifiable under the rosebushes forever. Until he died, when it would no longer matter to him.

The rosebushes, of course, were only planted the next day, or the day after — he was unable to remember. Because he couldn't dig it up again. He couldn't even bring himself to bury it deeper, safer.

Not just then. Several times since he'd even gone so far as taking out a spade. There would be a risk — the neighbors, anyone, might see him; or someone might see him wherever he dumped the remains. Anyway, traces would be left. But although to dig deeper would be a lesser risk, he couldn't for whatever reason make himself disturb it.

So he has to live with the rosebushes forever. And with the rosebushes, at present, although these might in time vanish or fade, all those other horrors his mind projects — the two raincoated men at the door in particular. "Could we have a word with you, sir, please?"

They always said sir; they always said please.

A normal, a fulfilled life was beyond him forever — he accepted that. It was sufficient to stay undetected, allowing the hope that at

some time he would become free of all but rational apprehension. There could always occur the gas explosion, the burst pipe, but these were long, long odds. He had thought of everything — how often he'd thought of everything! He was safe, except for that one-in-a-million chance. And if only he could make himself believe it, a kind of happiness must be possible.

The doorbell rang. He put down the single glass of whisky he allowed and went to the window. Whoever had rung was not visible. But he forced himself. He put on the porch light.

And they were both big, they were both wearing raincoats — coats of some type, anyway.

"Good evening, sir."

"Can you spare us a moment? Please."

Whatever came next he didn't hear. He heard the words "Residents Association."

"What did you say?"

"...and ask you if you'd sign this petition, please."

"Though now, sir, admittedly, it's probably too late."

"But if you would, sir. Please."

"What did you say?"

He didn't hear what they replied, because he had started laughing. He went on laughing until the two men, shrugging at each other, then one muttering an uncertain "Good night," turned away, walked out of the gate, where they halted a moment talking together. They then went on to the neighboring house.

He might not even have shut the door behind them. He was still laughing back in his sitting room. So much, he told himself, laughing, for the specters that fear creates. Another ghost had been laid. And with the doorbell vanquished, only the rosebushes remained. Those now, surely, he could soon learn to live with peacefully. He poured himself a second glass of whisky.

Meanwhile, the two men from the Residents Association were explaining to his neighbor how the Council had obtained a Compulsory Purchase Order for a road in place of the alley, which would involve digging up all their back gardens.

A Friend Who Understands *by* Donald Olson

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A new short story by Donald Olson

An unusual story... "Still without a whisper of impatience in his tone he asked what it was she meant to do, and this time, in a breathless, defiant rush of words, she told him"...

For Harriet Winger the passage of time had been as uneventful, by and large, as a journey, blindfolded in a balloon, across a vast and silent desert with nothing to gauge the distance she had traveled. Nor had there been husband, children, or lovers whose changing faces might have served as guideposts of her own progress through life. She was no longer certain even of her own age. The dusty, gold-scrolled mirrors throughout the big old house on Canterbury Drive reflected the face of a woman who might have been anywhere from fifty to seventy, for though her untidy gray hair and scrawny neck revealed the truth, her face itself had retained a youthfulness that might have led one to believe nothing very dramatic had ever occurred to disturb the tranquillity of those passive features reflected in the glass.

It was a face as rarely seen in the community as anything else that lay hidden behind the severe brick façade of the Tuscan-style mansion brooding well back from the road among its unkempt lawns and gardens. And yet Harriet was disturbed, a disturbance that had progressed over the past few weeks from feelings of mild neurotic distress to frantic desperation. This latter acute stage of despair dated from the moment she first realized that Piper's betrayal of her affection — all those years of solitary devotion! — gave every indication of becoming a permanent estrangement.

For weeks the bird had refused to respond to her endearments, had not touched his food, and remained mutely unresponsive to the frail, beseeching finger gently prodding his green- and yellow-feathered body through the bars of his antique cage in the gloomy, mahogany-burdened dining room. His spiny claws clung to the perch, his yellow head rested against the bars, his clove-seed eyes regarded her with the pitiless stare of a stranger.

Yes, Harriet had grown desperate without Piper's constant perky squawks of sympathy and encouragement. She felt bewilderingly

alone, bereft of her only source of comfort in a world dominated by the cranky, demanding presence of Uncle Emil. She heard him now — *tap-tap-tap... tap-tap-tap,* and she turned her drooping eyes wearily toward the great spindled staircase down which floated that imperious summons. Since Uncle Emil had lost the power of speech after a series of strokes, his only means of communicating his incessant demands for attention were by tapping his cane on the carpetless floor of his room or by clapping his hands like some Eastern potentate summoning a faithful slave. *Tap-tap-tap. Clap-clap-clap.* Day and night sometimes. And when she had dragged herself up the long flight of stairs more often than not all he wanted her to do was keep him company; for hours she was obliged to sit rocking away in the corner while the old man lay on his bed as mute and cheerless as Piper had become in the last few weeks.

She had borne it all with unprotesting fortitude in years past when the occasional relative or neighbor would stop in and commend her for her saintliness, her compassion, for the stoic resignation with which she wore her martyr's crown. But now the relatives and the old neighbors had all died. Most of the adjoining houses were cut up into flats whose young occupants ignored her. But then what else could they do when she herself never stepped outside the door or answered the doorbell when anyone did venture to ring it?

The particular form her desperation took was in a feeling of horrible confinement and a morbid awareness of the tomb-like silence in which she lived. Even the clocks had betrayed her, refusing any longer to chime or tell the time. And now that Piper had joined this conspiracy of silence it had become unbearable. She was obsessed with a rage to escape. Yes, to escape before it was too late, before she herself became as stiff and silent as the massive Victorian furniture, the clocks, the bird. Escape from that endless *tap-tap-tap, clap-clap-clap.* Escape from the chair in Uncle Emil's room. She would go mad if she didn't escape.

Although the telephone still functioned — she needed that to place her grocery order — it never rang, and she had long ago stopped subscribing to the daily paper. Still she would sometimes pick up one of the old papers stacked messily in the hall and read herself to sleep over it. That the wars, accidents, births, deaths, and marriages she read about had occurred years in the past made no difference to her. Events never changed, only names.

But now one evening, driven by that furious sense of desperation, she did something quite extraordinary. Her eyes happened to fall on a personals ad in the classified section of the paper lying across her lap. It read:

Troubled? Lonely? Desperate? Need a friend who understands? Call

this number.

A fragile hope invaded her mind as the word *desperate* leaped out at her. *She* was desperate. Oh, frightfully desperate. And Piper, the only friend who had understood her, had unaccountably and perversely abandoned her.

Before the impulse had a chance to die she got out of bed, fumbled in her sewing basket for a pair of shears, and clipped the ad from the paper. Scarcely knowing what she would say, she dialed the number in the ad with a trembling finger, and only when a man's voice responded did she feel a sudden shyness and confusion. The mere sound of a stranger's voice distracted her from the purpose of her call.

"Who *is* this? Is someone there?" the voice kept repeating, and finally, in a tremulous little-girl voice she whispered into the phone, "Harriet. It's Harriet."

"Harriet?"

"Who is this?" she asked falteringly.

"Denton."

"I saw it... in the paper. I had to call." And she read out the text of the ad. "I am desperate!" she cried, frightened by a horrible doubt that she might not qualify for the understanding promised in the ad. "I truly *am* desperate."

"What seems to be the trouble?" the voice asked, not urgently but with a gentle, inquiring curiosity. And then: "Hello? Harriet? You still there?"

"Yes... yes. I'm always here. I can't get out."

"Now do calm down, my dear. I don't understand. You say you can't get out? Do you mean you're trapped somewhere?"

Trapped! Oh, yes, she was trapped. "It's *him*. Uncle Emil. I have to take care of him. It's awful. Degrading. I could bear it as long as Piper would talk to me. But now he won't. I don't know why, but he won't say a word. I feel so all alone. Desperate, desperate, desperate!"

The jumble of words seemed not to put him off, and when she paused for breath he replied soothingly, as if to a child, "Now, Harriet, my dear, please start from the beginning. If I'm to help you I must know precisely what the problem is. Do you understand, Harriet?"

Her head jerked toward the door. Did she hear something? Alarmed, she pressed the mouthpiece to her lips. "He mustn't *know*. He'd be furious." And then in a burst of emotion: "There's no other way out! I can't just *leave* him. I don't want to do it but there's no other way."

"You don't want to do what, my dear?"

But now she hesitated, frightened and unsure. "Nobody would understand."

"Isn't that why you called me? Because *I* might understand?"

A friend who understands. Yes, that's what the ad promised.

"Somebody must listen. Somebody *must* understand."

Unceasingly patient, the voice promised to understand, but now Harriet's courage failed her. "Not now," she whispered. "I'm afraid."

A sigh came over the line. "I understand, my dear. Perhaps you'll call me again?"

She dropped the phone ever so softly and craned her neck above the pillow, listening.

Gary flung the door shut and propped his dripping umbrella against the wall in the foyer before advancing into the living room of the apartment. His face wore a tired, disgruntled frown as he ripped off his tie and headed for the liquor cabinet. Denton was just hanging up the phone.

"For me?" Gary asked peevishly.

Black hair and the ivory pallor of his skin gave an impression of manliness combined with delicacy to the face of the young man sprawled negligently on the sofa. He smiled up at his friend. "Could have been, if among your acquaintance of female crackpots there's one named Harriet."

"I don't know any Harriet."

"Then it must have been a wrong number. Do you get many?"

Gary flung him a satirical look. "I'm not around here long enough to get any calls, wrong or right. *I* have to work, remember?" Gary managed a restaurant and worked from noon until often late at night. Now, sipping his drink, he regarded the indolent, mocking expression on Denton's face with frank distaste.

"Any luck today?" Gary asked.

"To the extent I did not get mugged, break a leg, or run into any of my more belligerent creditors, yes, one might say I was lucky."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, Gary, I know what you mean. And the answer is no, I didn't get the part."

"Or look for any other sort of job, needless to say."

"I'm an *actor,* not a dishwasher."

Gary drained his glass and stood twirling it in his hands. "The job at Raffaelo's is hardly a dishwasher's. Believe me I had to do a good job of acting myself to convince Tony you could handle it."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

This flippant reply seemed all that Gary needed to make up his mind. "Then that's it, pal. I told you I'd put you up for a couple of weeks. It's been over a month. You'll have to make other arrangements before the weekend."

Denton reacted with a malicious grin. “Darling Peggy’s idea, no doubt? I can just hear her: ‘He’s nothing but a sponger. Kick him out.’ ”

“Peggy has nothing to do with it. I’ve just had it up to here. So let’s drop it, okay?”

“And where do you suggest I pitch my tent?”

“Try a hotel.”

“Gladly. If you’ll tender me a friendly loan.”

“Considering I haven’t seen a dime of what I’ve already given you? Don’t be dumb.”

Recalling something mad Harriet had said, Denton replied with a hopeless shrug, “A friend who understands. How can I be so lucky?”

“Can it, Denton. If you’re really all that desperate you’d take whatever job you could find.”

With the bizarre phone call still at the back of his mind, Denton laughed. “Oh, I’m not nearly so desperate as some people. I’ll get by.”

In a spirit of newfound rebelliousness Harriet stubbornly shut her ears to the cranky *tap-tap-tap* that dogged her consciousness as she wandered aimlessly from room to room in the gloomy old house. I don’t hear a thing, she kept telling herself. It’s all in my mind. She stopped in front of Piper’s cage and returned his sullen, glazed stare with an arch smile. “I don’t, my darling. I don’t hear a blessed thing.”

But of course she did. It kept hammering relentlessly in her brain. Her mind was made up. There was only one way to silence it.

“Harriet? I was afraid you weren’t going to call. I was worried about you, my dear.”

“Were you, Denton? Were you truly?”

“Well, the way you sounded last night. I mean, so *desperate.*”

“Oh, I am. Frightened and desperate.”

“I know the feeling, my dear. Believe me.”

“I can’t bear it any longer!” she cried. “I’ve made up my mind. I really am going to do it. There’s no other way.”

Still without a whisper of impatience in his tone he asked what it was she meant to do, and this time, in a breathless, defiant rush of words, she told him.

“I’m going to kill him!”

The ensuing prolonged silence frightened her. “Denton? Are you there? Please answer me.”

His voice reached her, subdued, a trifle anxious. “I’m here, Harriet. I heard you.”

“I know it sounds most awfully wicked, but it’s *not.* How could it be? He’s a miserable, ugly, detestable old man!”

Another pause. “Of course, dear. I understand. But do you think

it's wise? Not everybody is as understanding as I am, you know."

"Nobody *cares.* We're all alone here. We've been shut up here together, just the two of us, for years and years. Nobody will ever know."

Suddenly a vision invaded her mind, a vision of blue skies and great puffy white clouds reflected in a mirror-smooth lake bordered with tall green pine trees. Where was it? She strained to bring the picture into focus. Mama and Papa were with her, she remembered that, and there was a wicker picnic basket and the sound of laughter.

"Oh, Denton, I must get away from here!"

"Harriet? Where is 'here?' You must tell me so I can understand. Where do you live?"

The question revived the memory of a smiling old lady in the pavilion by the lake.

"And what is your name, dear?" And she spoke the answer aloud, as if she were back there now, staring up into the lady's face, "My name is Harriet Winger and I live at 82 Canterbury Drive."

As if bemused by the childlike, singsong reply, Denton laughed softly. "That's better, dear. You sound much calmer now. It must be terribly difficult for you, all alone with your Uncle Emil to take care of... and very expensive, I shouldn't wonder?"

"Oh, he's *rich.* He pretends not to be, but he doesn't fool me. There's ever so much money hidden around the house. And all those gold watches and gold coins. His precious collection. Always drooling over it, he is."

"But what do you live on, dear?"

"The bank used to send a check every month," she explained, warming to Denton's interest. How wonderful it was to find a friend who understood! "But I never cashed them and now Mr. Hopson brings the money and puts it in the mailbox."

Mentioning Mr. Hopson's name suddenly brought the cottage to mind, reawakening an instinct of pleasure long forgotten. The cottage! It must still be there. She remembered dimly being pestered by some other creature from the bank who wanted her to sell it, but she had refused. And now it came to her as the answer to a prayer.

"I'll move out to the cottage on the lake," she confided to Denton. "Just Piper and I. It's this house, I know it is. Piper will be his old self again once we're at the cottage."

She became aware that Denton was speaking. "...a perfectly divine idea, dear. But I can't believe you're really serious about — you know. A nice refined lady like you? How could you possibly kill Uncle Emil?"

"With his medicine! I'll put something in his medicine." She darted a look toward the bedroom door, then hugged the phone to her

head, whispering softly, “It’s called arsenic. It’s in a glass jar in the cellar.”

“Now Harriet, you mustn’t do anything rash. Someone might come to the house—”

“I *told* you. Nobody ever comes.”

“Perhaps if I came to see you — we could talk about it.”

This provoked a panicky response. “Oh, no. Never. Uncle Emil would have a fit. The last man who came calling on me was all but thrown bodily out of the house.” Now what was his name? Gordon? George? She couldn’t even remember what he looked like.

“But didn’t you say your uncle is an invalid? I’m sure he couldn’t __”

“He just pretends not to be able to walk. He doesn’t fool me. I hear him at night when I’m in bed. Roaming all around the house. He just makes believe he’s helpless so I’ll wait on him hand and foot. He’s been doing it for years.”

Denton assured her that he understood her predicament but urged her not to do anything until they’d had more time to talk about it. “You sound awfully tired now, Harriet. Why don’t you try to get a good night’s sleep and then call me again tomorrow night.”

She was tired. Dreadfully tired. She had forgotten what a strain the most casual social intercourse could place on the mind. It had been so long since she had had an understanding friend to confide her troubles to.

Denton made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner the following night, which might have been barely palatable if good old Gary hadn’t balked at bringing any more beer into the house. Or food either, for that matter. Peggy’s bright idea, no doubt. “Starve the bum out,” was no doubt her advice. And to think it was he who had introduced Gary to her.

Now he was left with no choice but to move out. Only you can’t move out without somewhere to move in. Not that Gary cared about that. Fair-weather friends. They were all alike. Denton had relieved his boredom these last few nights by listening to Desperate Harriet but had not seriously given any thought to how he might exploit the situation. It was all too bizarre. But now he kept thinking about what she had let drop about all those gold watches, gold coins, and money hidden in the house. Could it be true? And was she really all alone there except for an invalid uncle?

Denton, to be fair, had never actually stooped to out-and-out thievery, but then he had never been quite so desperate himself. Besides, what good was money to a fruitcake like Harriet and her bedridden uncle? She’d no doubt be carted away once Uncle Emil was

dead and whatever money there was would probably find its way into some crummy nursing home or crooked lawyer's pockets.

He decided there was only one way to find out how much of Harriet's blather might be true, and having scrounged enough change from Gary's clothes and bureau drawers to cover cab fare, he set out for Canterbury Drive in a light rain shower.

He got out at the end of the street, turned up his coat collar, and proceeded to look for number 82. The area was one of once majestic old dwellings just east of Delevan Park which had been converted to doctors' offices, headquarters for various charities, and apartments. Number 82 stood like a forgotten relic among all the others. An iron-railed fence supporting great raggedy clumps of overgrown rhododendrons bordered the property. It was an almost comically spooky old place and as Denton crept through the gate and along the winding sidewalk he would have sworn no one could possibly still reside there, it projected such a dismal air of decay and neglect. Even in broad daylight it would have presented a forbidding aspect with its vine-covered brick walls and tall arched windows.

That it was not in fact abandoned became clear when he spotted a dim light in one of the upper windows. He checked his watch. It was one hour past midnight. He circled the house and with the cautious use of his flashlight confirmed that all the doors were locked. Having done that he wasn't sure what course to pursue. Had there been more than the one light visible he might have boldly rung the doorbell just to see what would happen. He could always say he was looking for some non-existent neighbor. But having observed the extreme neglect of the premises he was now inclined to believe Harriet's story of living alone in the mansion with Uncle Emil.

A sudden increase in the rain's force decided him. Discovering a broken windowpane in the enclosed back porch he managed to dislodge it, stick his hand in, and raise the window. Once inside he found the door into the house itself easy to jimmy open. He found himself in a sort of pantry and after listening for a minute or so he proceeded to explore.

Suddenly he froze. *Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.* From somewhere in the rooms beyond he heard it and recalled Harriet's bitter mimicking of this sound that had so disturbed her. And no wonder. It twisted his own nerves into a knot. But as it plainly came from the upper regions of the house he felt safe in progressing beyond the kitchen into a wide dark-paneled hall. He stifled a gasp as his foot collided with something bulky, and flashing his light downward he saw that it was an untidy bundle of faded newspapers, a number of which littered the floor; they struck a discordant note as his light glanced off tall gilt-framed mirrors and along the dusty surface of cold white marble. That

the house could indeed be a treasure trove filled him with a nerve-tingling excitement.

He moved stealthily into the other rooms, occasionally recoiling as invisible cobwebs trailed wispily across his face, and gradually his nostrils grew accustomed to a pervasive odor of decomposition. Not the ripe, sickening aroma of recent decay but more a stale, lingering accumulation of years. Advancing into the dining room his light presently came to rest on the ornate birdcage.

Denton uttered a faint grunt of revulsion as the bird itself became trapped in the light's beam. The thing had obviously been dead for weeks. He smiled. No wonder it had lapsed into silence. Meanwhile the tapping still continued from somewhere overhead. In the parlor — he instinctively thought of it as such with its clutter of walnut-carved Victorian furniture — his light revealed a newspaper flung across the seat of a horsehair-upholstered loveseat. A neatly excised square caught his eye. Evidently something had been clipped from the classified section. He noted the paper's date: September 3, 1947. Well, that explained one thing. Not a wrong number but the wrong decade.

Realizing that a systematic search of the premises would require hours of patient snooping he decided it was essential to determine who in fact occupied the house and to do that he would have to explore the upper rooms.

The tapping grew louder as he ascended the stairs and when he reached the top he discovered its source — a raindrop struck him unexpectedly square on the nose. As he moved aside the steady plop-plop-plop resumed.

A thread of light showed beneath the nearest door. Hearing no sound from within the room as he pressed an ear to the panel he quietly opened the door. In the dingy glow of a pink-shaded bedlamp he saw Harriet asleep on the bed, her nest of ratty gray hair framing a curiously young-old face. He retreated, shutting the door behind him.

The two adjoining bedrooms were both vacant and when he arrived at the one at the end of the passage he knew it must be Uncle Emil's. Wasn't it likely that if there were in fact gold coins and watches they would be secreted in this room? Even if he disturbed the old man he wouldn't be able to cry out, assuming Harriet had been telling the truth about his speechlessness. Without actually thinking of it as a possible weapon, Denton gripped the flashlight more tightly in his sweating fist.

One sweep of the light revealed what Denton had expected to find. Beneath the covers in a huge carved-oak bed the figure did not move. As Denton crept to the side of the bed his nostrils were assailed by an even more oppressive odor of dusty corruption. He had to make certain the old fellow was indeed asleep and not shamming.

He reached across and carefully lifted the cover, then almost instantly reared back with an audible gasp of horrified disgust. If the bird had been dead for weeks, Uncle Emil had clearly been decaying for months.

With a clatter the flashlight dropped from Denton's hand and rolled under the bed. Panic-stricken, he fell to his knees and scrambled to retrieve it. Unable to find it he sprang to his feet and as he tried to flee from the room, he collided heavily in the darkness with a small side chair. Some object rolled off its seat as the chair overturned. Denton's hand closed around a heavy cane with a metal knob on its end. Using it to feel his way in the inky blackness he retreated back toward the stairs. All he wanted now was to get out of this putrid-smelling charnel house.

The noise from Uncle Emil's room awakened Harriet with a start. She rose up in bed, her heart pounding. *Tap-tap-tap.* Her hand flew to her throat. It was no nightmare. It was real. He was out of his room. The old devil was again on the prowl.

Desperate, desperate, desperate. It had to end. Now! Tonight! She felt she would never sleep again if she did not once and for all find the courage to do what must be done.

Her fingers fumbled in the bedside table drawer and closed around the pair of shears with which she had cut out the clipping. Clutching them to her breast she crawled out of bed and tiptoed to the door.

Tap-tap-tap... He was right outside. With a wailing screech of rage and terror she flung open the door and plunged the shears into the dark figure poised to descend the stairs. With a long-drawn dying scream the figure plunged headlong into the darkness below.

The shrill jangling of the phone awakened Gary out of a sound sleep. With a muttered oath he rolled over and snatched it up.

"Denton! Denton!"

Gary's temper exploded. "He's not *here!"*

The hysterical, pleading voice paid no heed. "I did it, Denton! I did it! I'm so frightened, Denton. Tell me what to—"

Gary banged the phone down and with a heavy groan of annoyance buried his face in the pillow. Yes, lady, he's gone, but keep trying. He's not gone for good, the bum, the freeloader.

Nobody could be that lucky.

Look of Eagles
by Jo Lockwood

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Department of "First Stories"

This is the 579th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine... behind the scenes of a sleazy racetrack...

The author, Jo Lockwood, is an ex-model and home-economics director, and has written travel-tourism publicity, political speeches, radio and television copy for a food concern. She loves horses and horse-racing, currently has 11 cats and a dog, and lives in a small house in the country...

A lot of money passes through the turnstiles and over the counter betting windows at even the poorest tracks in this country, and Whitman Downs is one of the moldiest.

You walk around the infield or the paddock and you'll see what I mean. The fences are chipped and peeling, and the turf is more weeds than bluegrass. The rails lean like willows over a pond, and you wonder if the only bangtails that could win out here would be polo ponies, taking those turns at a tilt.

But a lot of the characters you see are wearing their polyesters with silk ties by Sulka and well glossed shoes by Bally, and their fat hands flash diamond pinky rings.

Not the working stiffs, of course.

Most of them stick to faded jeans and slept-in flannel shirts. Oh, now and then you might spot a fancy tooled-leather belt or a pair of $300 boots, but mostly it's no-nonsense stuff.

That's why Ginger stood out in the crowd.

She'd have been a looker anywhere, of course, with that hair the color of a Kansas wheatfield and eyes so big and blue they were drowning pools. Nothing wrong with the figure, either. She was a tall girl and built a little like those slick models, except with curves. Legs as long as a colt's, but with a nice girl-shape above the slim ankles.

More than that, though, it was the way she carried herself — proud and erect, with a certain class. There was something about her that made you wonder what she was doing around a sleazy back-of-beyond racetrack. Not that she didn't legitimately belong; her father was one of the trainers, and she'd grown up around tack rooms and stables — some of them pretty good, some of them pretty tacky, if

you'll pardon the pun.

Whit Dunbar, Ginger's dad, had a small string of horses to take care of and was known to be one of the best. Trouble was, he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

One of the biggest problems a trainer has is not the bunch of horses he has to work with, though that can be bad enough, but the owners. You bring a colt along nice and easy, he's working well and maybe takes a nice little race against his own kind, and right away the owner gets dollar bills in his eyes and Kentucky Derby on his mind.

Then there are the ones who won't take the trainer's word, or even the vet's, that the horse isn't fit. They seem to think you can give a nag a carrot and shake a little something into his oats and he'll be ready overnight. *Some* of the owners, that is. Around Whitman Downs it runs to a pretty high percentage. Ask Beau Jellife, my boss. He's just working his way back up after being barred from several tracks for sprinkling a little *too* much "stuff" on the feed of a little filly the owner insisted should go into an allowance race she had no business being in the gate for.

Anyway, it wasn't illegal drugs but Whit Dunbar's mouth that kept getting *him* into hot water. He'd told off I don't know how many owners. When a horse wasn't ready, he'd say so, and if the owners didn't go along with his judgment, he didn't refrain from describing them and their antecedents. It kept Dunbar with a very limited string of horses, because some of those owners weren't going to take it from the hired help.

It didn't matter, either, that Whit Dunbar's family was once one of *them.* His grandfather had been the Whitman for whom this track was named, in its better days a long time ago. But the money and the stables had gone the way of a lot of fortunes back in the Great Depression, and Whit worked for other people now. The horses were all somebody else's.

Except for one animal, and that one he had in Ginger's name.

I remember the day he bought that filly at Fasig-Tipton's yearling sales. I was with him when they brought out Number 134, and Whit's eyes lit up like he'd had a century bet on Temperence Hill winning the Belmont.

Funny, she wasn't a very pretty thing. Gangly-like, as most yearlings are, and moreover, she sort of shuffled. Now I know a horse can't really shuffle, but she sure looked as if she dragged her feet. We were positioned right at the rail of the little circle where they walked the horses, and Whit clucked to her. She flipped her head up so fast I thought she was going to lift the little groom who was holding her bridle right off the ground. Whit swears she gave him the "look of eagles" that horsemen are always talking about.

The upshot was he blew nearly every cent he had on that chestnut, outbidding some fancy-pants fellas that strolled around making like John Hay Whitneys while jumpsuited flunkies did *their* inspecting and bidding. I was eyeing Whit like he'd lost his mind, but all he kept saying was, "She has the look."

Well, since then she's proved she can run all right — like the wind. And she's a kind thing to rate — a dream horse. Whit talks about her as if she might be his ticket back to the Big Time, and he just might be right. She's due to put it all on the line in her first real test this weekend.

But that "look of eagles" from the chestnut filly cost Whit a lot more than the $15,000 he shelled out last year. Today it cost him his daughter's life.

If only he hadn't made it sound like such a sure thing...

Days start early at Whitman Downs, as at most tracks. It wasn't long after sunup that Ramon, one of the exercise boys, found Ginger's body alongside the training oval, when he rode Samarkand out for a work. She was lying face down on the dew-wet grass by the timer's stand, but he didn't even have to dismount to see that she was dead. There was a big hole in the back of her neck, and her wheat-colored hair was bronze with blood.

That Samarkand must have set a record with Ramon galloping him back to the stabling area, because Ramon was screaming and whipping and sobbing and yelling for the cops at the same time.

First one out to see what all the hollering was about was Whit himself, who'd been talking with Don Hauser, one of the few owners who'll get up early enough to watch the dawn workouts. The two of them and "Bulldog" Smith, the track's owner (or that part of it not in hock), ran — fast. My boss Beau Jellife followed at a somewhat slower clip, while he sent me for the police.

I make better time in my wheelchair than most of them can on their two legs. With the powerful arms I've built up, it's an acquired skill. By the time I got back with Lieutenant McLane, Whit Dunbar was cradling his daughter's body in his arms, with her blood staining his bluejacket.

Don Hauser was standing there looking lost as he helplessly whacked a crop against his boots. Bulldog Smith made strange crooning sounds that were somewhere between a sob and a hound's wail.

Lieutenant McLane got right to work while I wheeled myself all over the place scrunching this way and that, looking for a bullet casing I figured had to be there.

"For Pete's sake, Wyman, you're digging up enough to plant

flowers! Keep that contraption still!"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, I thought I could help by finding the bullet."

"Well, don't think! You're not on the force now. When I need your help, I'll ask" — and then, apparently thinking better of that not-too-tactful remark, he added in a kinder tone — "How about getting these people out of here for me? The boys and the wagon are on the way."

I touched Bulldog's arm and steered him off. Beau Jellife needed very little coaxing, and Hauser, too, looked relieved to be sent away. I decided Whit Dunbar had a right to stay there with his daughter. The rest of us, with the still-quivering jockey Ramon, gathered in my quarters which adjoined Beau's tack rooms.

It seemed a good time for a few strong belts, so I broke open the bar, even though the sun wasn't hardly full up over the infield yet. Hauser cast an appreciative eye on the lacquered Chinese cabinet where I stocked the booze, and I noticed he also took in the antique French armoire and Kirman carpet.

"Pretty fancy for a stable," he said.

"Yeah. I like to live as well as I can, and my salary and pension give me enough to get by okay," I told him, not that it was any of his business. It was true, though. I'd only made it to detective sergeant, but when a wild shot hit me in the spine and ended that career, I'd started another with Beau — part security man, part assistant trainer, part most everything else. My disability pay was pretty good, and Beau wasn't stingy with the green even if he wasn't always too heavy with it for himself. And there were always poker games and a good safe bet now and then.

I made out fairly well, generally. Up and down sometimes, but then I didn't have much besides myself to spend it on. As for living "in a stable," as Hauser put it, I'd figured that if I had to be at the track to watch over the ponies I might as well move in. And I'm one of those guys who likes even the smell of horses.

I opened the liquor cabinet and told them to choose their own poisons while I wheeled out to the little kitchen for ice. When I'd filled the teak bucket from my specially designed low ice chest and rejoined them, I saw we had more company: Howard Lanier and Sal Verdi, neither of whom I particularly welcomed at any time, and especially not now.

Lanier had, until recently, been one of "those" owners — expecting every horse to be Nashua, but not parting with the bucks to give it half a chance. It wasn't as though he didn't have the cash. He was loaded. A tall handsome guy with an arrogant air and a supercilious smirk on his face half the time. I didn't like him.

I didn't like him to play poker with either, but he often filled up a game late at night around the barns. At least he lost like a gentleman

and helped to keep us in good whiskey.

Verdi was one of those meatballs you wouldn't want to bump into in an alley. Screwy thing about that, because there really wasn't much against him except his appearance and his manners. He looked like a cold potato, and he used a gold toothpick to flick away the tobacco that clung to his teeth from the smushed old cigars he sucked in his fat mouth. A *gold* toothpick. That'll give you an idea.

Word was that Verdi was trying to buy a controlling interest in the track; wanted to make it into something classier. Maybe he would. But if he saw it for classy, he'd have to keep *himself* in the background, way back. Bulldog Smith wouldn't strike you as Ivy League, but seeing him you wouldn't think you'd wandered into a remake of "The Godfather."

There wasn't any doubt that Bulldog needed the money Sal Verdi could contribute, but so far he'd resisted the fat man's attempts to buy in. Everybody wondered how long Bulldog could hold out.

We sat around staring at each other, the seven of us, and it seemed no amount of alcohol was going to ease the tension. Poor little Ramon had to be reassured that it was okay to sit down in his riding clothes, and still he looked like he was on a horse he expected to bolt for the fences.

I watched every one of them to see if I could catch any signs. In a way I gave them a preliminary grilling, just keeping it conversational-like but trying to see if they knew anything or had seen anything. After all, those years on the force had to give me some advantage.

Came up zero. Hauser had joined Whit for coffee early and then went to the barn to look at one of his horses due to race later in the week. Claimed he didn't know Ginger was even at the track until Ramon had made his wild cavalry charge on Samarkand.

Bulldog had had an appointment with Verdi for seven o'clock. Ginger was found at a quarter to. Verdi said he'd just parked his car and was headed for the clubhouse when the noise Ramon was making attracted his attention. Same with Bulldog, except he'd come from the other direction. He lived in the old caretaker's cottage on the south side of what had once been the Whitman Estate. That wasn't far from where Whit Dunbar and Ginger boarded — ironically, as paying guests in the Big House that long ago had belonged to Whit's own people. It couldn't be more than five minutes from the training track.

Beau and I had been gassing in my rooms from about six. I remembered checking my watch just as he knocked on the door. We had gone over strategy for Little Bit, the nice colt he had scheduled for the Havenside Stakes on Saturday, against Whit's horse and five others that didn't really count.

I had been a little on edge, and we'd had some strong eye-openers

in our coffee. With what I was tossing down now, I should have had some glow, but all I felt was empty inside about Ginger lying out there with that beautiful life oozed out of her.

As for Handsome Howard, he was losing his aristocratic look with every slosh of the Scotch, and I was just starting to get past his hemming and hawing as to where had been, when the lieutenant came in.

"Anybody confessed yet, Wyman?" he asked, lumbering his big frame through the doorway.

"Not funny, Lieutenant. We all knew her. We all liked her," I said, with as much dignity as I could muster.

"Yeah, well somebody didn't like her. She's plenty dead out there, and that red stuff all over her head isn't sign paint."

"*Please*, McLane, can't you take it a little easy?" begged Howard Lanier in a cracked, queasy sort of voice. The cubes in his glass rattled as his hand shook. Hauser didn't look too good, either.

I offered McLane a drink, knowing he wouldn't take it because he was on duty, but it seemed the polite thing to do, what with all the rest of us drinking.

As I expected, he turned it down and started right in, going over the same ground with each of us that I'd just covered. He didn't get anything more than I did, except a few nervous embellishments, until he moved to Howard.

"Well, as a matter of fact, Lieutenant," Howard told him, with the start of a blush which did him no credit, "Ginger and I — well, we spent the night together."

"You *what?"*

It wasn't only McLane that shouted. At least four others sounded just as shocked.

"Yes, well, um — we'd had a little candlelight dinner at my place and one thing led to another..." Howard stammered.

Just thinking about what he was saying was enough to make me boil, even if I'd pretty much seen it coming. Luckily, Beau caught the rage in my eyes and held onto my chair, or I swear I would have run that rat Lanier into the wall.

Even Verdi looked mad; he was puffing up like a balloon ready to burst. I wondered how Whit Dunbar would feel when he heard about it, and then I thought: maybe he knew.

The lieutenant looked around at us and decided to continue the conversation in private. Not that it could stay private for long, with a murder at the end of it, but I could see where it was the wiser thing for the moment.

He took Howard by the arm with a "We'd better finish this elsewhere," and left the rest of us with our chins hanging down.

After a stunned silence everybody began gabbling at once, and by the time they strayed off, my head was aching like the little men with the hammers were at work inside. I was squeezing out my anger by kneading one of my rubber exercise rods in my hands. I'd have liked to have been using it on Lanier right then.

Beau Jellife hung behind. He seemed to have some instinct about how I felt.

"Were you in love with her, Paul?" His voice was full of sympathy.

"I guess I was. I suppose everybody was a little. And dammit, Beau, it's just such a *waste*. Stupid. Needless. I mean, her dead like that. It isn't *right*. It shouldn't have been Ginger."

It was idiot's talk, and I knew it. Certainly not professional, but I wasn't hurting this way as a pro.

"No, Paul. It shouldn't have been Ginger. Ever."

I didn't know whether he meant it shouldn't have been Ginger getting killed or shouldn't have been Ginger for me, but it didn't make any difference now. I'd never told her how I felt about her, and I certainly had stood no chance with her except as a friend. So I'd made that be enough.

After a pause he asked, "Did you know Lanier had something going with her?"

My lips were dry, in spite of all the liquid that had been passing through them the last few hours.

"I guess I knew. I just wish he didn't have to be talking about it now, bringing it all out and making her sound like one of his quickies. It dirties her," I said.

Like a good friend, which he was as well as being my boss, he let it pass and changed the subject to Little Bit and his chances in Saturday's race. It sounds abrupt and callous now, but it wasn't. He handled it just right by trying to get my mind away from Ginger and onto the only other thing I gave a rap about. Trouble was, it wasn't far enough away.

Little Bit had been scheduled — and still was, unless either Whit or Beau decided to cancel — to go against Whit Dunbar's filly in that race. And the filly, registered in his daughter's name, was called Ginger Peachy. Swell way to get my thinking off the girl.

Both Beau and Whit had a lot at stake in that race: Beau, because it could put him back in the running for the really good training jobs, and Whit because it would prove his thing about "the look." Of course, Beau's need was more immediate than Whit's. After all, the filly belonged to Whit Dunbar. Beau was just on the line for the owner who, unfortunately, happened to be Lanier.

Beau stayed around a few minutes and then wandered off. I'd just

begun to round up the glassware when McLane turned up again, all business and very official.

"Anybody out on the training track this morning before Ramon with that horse?"

"I don't think so," I answered. "You can check the sheet. There's a work schedule. But of course it'll only tell you if somebody was *supposed* to be there, not whether they really were."

"How about you and Beau? You two looked like you'd been up and around a while."

"Sure we were, and most of the regulars would have been, too. We start with the daylight. Beau and I had Little Bit set for a work at 8:30. Billy Winston was to ride. As a matter of fact, where the bleep is he? He was due here hours ago."

"Who's he?"

"Jockey from the Coast. Beau told Lanier we needed somebody topnotch, and Whit had already hired the best around here for Ginger Peachy. Winston was flying in last night. Maybe he put up at the Inn and slept through his call. I'd better check."

I started to wheel myself over to the phone when McLane broke in. "Hold it. Never mind. I'll do it. Maybe I'd like to have a talk with him."

"What for?"

"Use your head, Wyman. Maybe he *did* get his call, and maybe he *was* here on time, even a little early."

"Oh, my God. You think *he* had some reason to kill Ginger?"

"Who knows? So far I can't see that anybody had a reason, but she's dead just the same. I'd just like to see him first, that's all."

"Sure."

My stomach didn't know whether to sink, or swim up to my mouth. This whole business was getting to me. Where *was* Billy? I hadn't given him a thought since they'd found Ginger's body. He should have been around the jockey's room long since or even checking out Little Bit.

One thing I knew, he hadn't come around looking for either Beau or me while we were in my place from six o'clock. Not just in from a plane trip. He'd probably had a night at the bar and was hung over.

McLane was doggedly pursuing it. "Isn't it a little strange to bring in a rider days before the race? Thought that stakes was for Saturday. This is only Thursday."

"Didn't think you followed the horses, McLane. And no, it's not that unusual. You want your jockey to get the ride and feel of the horse a few times. Get 'em to know each other. Especially when it's an important race. If you can afford it."

"This was to be a big one, then?"

"For green two-year-olds, yes. Couple of good horses. Better'n most. Nice possibilities." It was an understatement.

"You said 'if you can afford it' — you and Beau could, then?"

"Not us — Lanier. He pays the bills. Of course, we have to convince him it's worth it. Usually we can't. In this case we did."

"Isn't it odd, too, for a filly to go against colts? I mean Ginger Peachy running against your horse—"

It hurt just to hear that name. Why did Whit have to call the horse after his daughter?

I swallowed, hard. "There you're right, mostly. In an ordinary year colts are tougher, stronger, bigger. But Whit thought so much of that chestnut he wanted to see right away what she could do. And there aren't so many good fillies out this way. She'd outclass 'em, and he figured she might go rank without competition."

"Rank?"

"Flat, stale, no drive."

"Oh."

"Anything else, Lieutenant?" I asked. "I'd like to help you all I can. What did you get from High-and-Mighty Howard?"

"Don't like him much, huh?"

"I don't have to."

"Well, he claims the Dunbar girl left his place about five."

"Alone? The skunk didn't even take her home?"

"He says she wanted to go alone. Wanted to take a look at her horse."

"So that's what she was doing there in street clothes. Seemed kinda funny. Usually she's in riding breeches or jeans when she comes to the track."

McLane was absent-mindedly twisting an exercise rod. "Why would she be out there and not at the barns?"

"I dunno. Maybe she was waiting for the workouts. Maybe she wanted to time everybody and compare Ginger Peachy with 'em."

"She didn't have a stopwatch, or we haven't found it. Matter of fact, we didn't find any purse, either. Sort of funny, don't you think?"

"How?"

"Woman comes from an all-nighter, she's had her purse along. And as you said, she usually wore casual clothes around the stables, so if she'd stopped off home, wouldn't she'd have changed?"

"I still don't see what you're getting at."

"Don't really know, myself. Just puzzling it out as I go along. Another thing, if anybody'd been at the barns, wouldn't somebody know — you, or security personnel?"

"There aren't that many. A few stable boys. Of course, Whit has Bessie."

"Who's Bessie?"

"Not who — *what.* Bessie's a goat. Lots of horses want company, so trainers have a dog or a chicken or something. Whit has a goat, and the darned thing's a *watch*goat, if you can believe it. Sets up a baaahing like you'd never forget if anybody goes near that horse. Except Ginger and Whit, of course."

"So that knocks out the idea of a stranger around, I guess."

"Seems so," I said. "You got any ideas yet? Think maybe somebody shot her by mistake?"

He snorted. "At close range, in the back of the head? In those clothes and with that hair, nobody was going to take her for a jockey or for Bulldog Smith or anybody else. Any other dames around here somebody might be gunning for?"

I tried to think up a good possibility, but Ramon's wife was tiny and dark-haired, Bulldog's missus seldom came around and was built like a blockhouse, anyway, and the groupies didn't turn up until afternoon.

The telephone clanged and I grabbed it, grateful for the interruption. "Yeah, he's right here. For you, McLane."

"Yeah. Okay. Got it. What caliber? Any idea yet how long? The angle? Humpf. That makes it a little interesting, doesn't it?" He looked around at the paintings on the walls and then at me and then down at his own fingernails as if he could find the answer there as he listened to the voice at the other end of the line. I'd recognized it as that of Sergeant Happ, an old friend.

"Um. And I want you to check on a jockey named Winston" — he looked at me for confirmation and I nodded — "Billy Winston. Stayed at the Inn, probably. Planed in from the Coast last night... *What?* Oh, damn. How is he? Okay. I'll be down soon. Find out all you can. Get that full medical soonest."

He jammed the receiver down.

"What's up?"

"Your Billy Winston got himself clunked on the head in a barroom brawl. Spent the night in Observation at the hospital."

"So that lets him out. And explains where he was when he was supposed to be here."

"That it does. Unless the brawl was a put-up job. But I can't think why." Abruptly he asked, "You much of a betting man these days, Wyman?"

It seemed a little out of context, but I answered him anyhow.

"A little here, a little there. Play poker."

"That where you pick up the change for all this expensive stuff?"

It was the second time this morning I'd had to explain how I supported my lifestyle and it rankled a little, but I did it again. He

seemed satisfied.

"Bet the horses much?"

"Some. I play my horses pretty safe, though. I've never been one for hunches."

"Yeah. Even on the force you never went off half cocked or on impulse. Got to play it that way sometimes, though — by a gut feeling."

He reminded me of Whit Dunbar and his "look of eagles."

"You've got a gut feeling about this?" I asked.

"Um. And I don't like it at all."

"I guess none of us likes this whole thing," I said.

"Wyman, she was shot *hours* before she was found, it looks like. And the angle of the bullet was *down.* Somebody standing over her, or somebody tall. The examiner isn't through, of course, but he's pretty sure."

I gave him an astonished look. "But that means somebody was prowling around here in the middle of the night."

"And you didn't know it, and the goat didn't sound any alarm. And more likely it was sometime shortly after five a.m., when she left Lanier—"

"If she left," I suggested. "What if she wasn't murdered there at the rail at all?" I was thinking fast, making the old detective mind work for me.

"She left Lanier, all right, if you're saying maybe he did it and dumped her there. He's got his housekeeper for an alibi." His tone was rueful. I guess even McLane would have liked to hang it on Lanier.

Abruptly again he switched the subject back to horses. "You still going to use Billy Winston Saturday?"

"Sure, if it's just a bump on the head. We'll have to get out a rush order for a substitute if it's more than that."

"The show must go on, huh?"

"For cryin' out loud, McLane, what're you after? Yeah, the race goes. Whit'll still run his horse, Lanier'll run his, and we'll see what's what. But if you think it means I'm not sorry or broken up that Ginger's dead, you're crazy. Of all people, I wouldn't have wanted—"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. By the way, let me see your gun."

"What the—" At first I wondered what he was driving at now, but then I realized that of course he had to ask. "Just a minute."

I rolled to the little deal table and pulled it out of the drawer. "Here. It hasn't been cleaned in a week. And it hasn't been fired." He hefted it. "Where'd you get this little baby? Thought you had a .38. This thing—" He looked at my two-and-a-half-inch-barrel special and sniffed. "Takin' up shootin' mice?"

"Aw, McLane. You know how it is. Everybody around here knows

I have a license to carry a gun. Everybody knows I'm an ex-cop. Everybody knows I can shoot. Just their knowing that is as good as having a cannon. Or at least I thought it was, before—"

"Nice little gun, though," he said. "Where's your other one? Don't tell me you found it too heavy to hold, with those big strong arms of yours."

"What other—"

"The .38 with the five-inch barrel you used to have."

"Hell, Lieutenant, I don't know. I guess I've got it packed in a trunk somewhere — you know, for old times' sake. I had it on the force. But a hip holster in a wheelchair isn't the easiest — that's why I changed to the smaller gun."

He smiled, but it was a smile that didn't quite reach his face.

"Sure. But get it for me, will you? You know how it is," he added, with just a hint of apology, "we have to touch all the bases. Some goon might've lifted it from you."

"No chance. But let me see. Oh, yeah. Maybe over here." I wheeled myself to the closet and leaned over to plow through the steamer trunk on the floor. I tossed junk every which way, digging down to the bottom for it. "No luck here. Oh. I wonder if I could've stuck it in that suitcase up on top."

I reached around to the peg on the door for my cane, but it wasn't there. I can get around a little with the help of that cane, but I can't lift myself without it. Where the devil was it? Oh, my God...

"Missing something, Paul?" McLane asked softly.

Panic started to hit me, and a sickening feeling that McLane was figuring it out. I didn't even want to turn around. I could hear the certainty growing; I didn't want to see it, too.

"I found the cane in Dunbar's barn, Wyman. Found the gun, too, shoved down in a feed bin. Haven't had time yet to run a check on it, but I guess we know what it'll show. She was killed with a .38. I suppose you meant to go back for it later. No purse, but I expect you'll fill us in about that. — You know, it threw me a minute ago when Happ told me the girl was shot from *above.* I figured you couldn't possibly have done it. She was a tall girl, and you in a wheelchair or out of it couldn't have gotten that angle on her. Until I thought of the cane. If you'd tripped her with it, and she was *down*—"

"Oh, shut up." I wheeled slowly around, biting my lip and trying to keep back the tears while I fought for a little dignity. It was almost a relief making my confession, except that I couldn't undo the part where beautiful Ginger Dunbar was dead.

I expected McLane to be disgusted with "a cop gone wrong," or at least angry, or even proud of himself that he'd solved it so quickly. Instead, he looked sorry.

"Hard to figure you, Paul. I thought you were sweet on her."

"*I LOVED HER!* McLane, believe me, I didn't want to kill her! I lost my head. She came in while I was giving a little something to Ginger Peachy—"

"You were hopping up *her* horse?"

"No, slowing her down. Just a little. And the race wasn't until Saturday, so's I could tell by the times how much difference there'd be against Little Bit, and—"

He finished for me. "And make the safest bet, is that it?"

It sounded so cut-and-dried.

"Yeah, yeah. That's it. No permanent damage, you see—"

"Except for Ginger. She got a little 'permanent damage' done her, wouldn't you say?"

"McLane, she walked in and grabbed for me and grabbed for the horse. I just tripped her with the cane, and I guess it was old habit, I whipped out the gun—"

"And shot her point-blank while she was lying flat on her face? Some nice 'old habit' you picked up."

"I mean, I wasn't thinking straight. I wasn't thinking of her as *her,* you see, not as Ginger, just as somebody — somebody—"

"Getting in your way. Boy, you must have wanted that safe bet pretty bad."

"See, I was into some of the guys kind of heavy. Sal Verdi, for one. And Lanier — all I needed was one sure thing, and it looked so easy."

McLane sighed. "You sure lost something somewhere along the line, didn't you?"

McLane had his own gun out now, trained on me as he dialed for the squad.

"You know, your dumping her out there at the rail was kinda smart. If I hadn't realized how strong you'd made your upper body it might not have occurred to me that a guy in a wheelchair could lift and haul her that far. You did a pretty good job messing up the ruts in the damp ground, too, with all that folderol of 'looking for the bullet.' I suppose you *did* drop a spent bullet there?" I nodded.

"Yeah. — Hello, Happ. Send the boys. What? Yeah, we got him. A track rat? I guess you could call him that. Just a fool who thought he could set up a sure thing."

He hung up and brought out the cuffs.

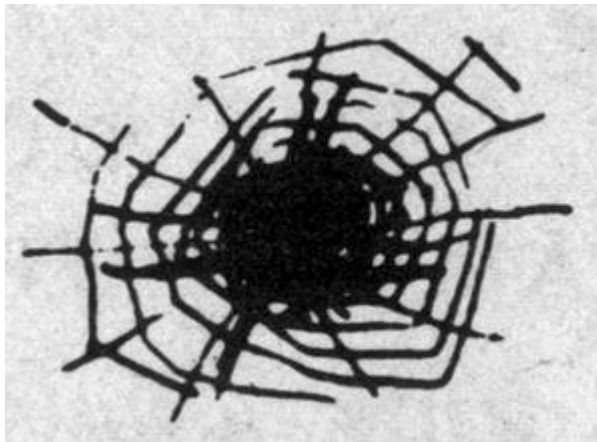
"Say, clear up a point for me, Wyman. There should have been blood around where you killed her. How'd you get rid of it?"

"It was on the hay. I— I — fed it to the goat."

"My God." He shook his head. "Too bad for you y'missed the cane."

I'm glad I didn't have to see Whit Dunbar when we left.

I guess McLane had it right when he told the sergeant he'd nabbed a fool who'd thought he could set up a sure thing.



What Time Do the Pyramids Open?
by Betty Jochmans

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Department of Second Stories

Betty Jochmans' first story, "The Glass Slipper Murder," appeared in our issue of February 11, 1980. Her second story, as usually happens with second stories, is altogether different — different in type, tone, and theme...

For five consecutive summers they had enjoyed wonderful trips to foreign countries. But Thalia had remained an "amateur traveler." It was Harold to whom traveling meant so much...

Driving into Oaxaca about 5:30, I had no idea that in a few hours I would see my dead wife, peering out of a black-and-white Mexican taxi as it careened down Hidalgo Street. But on my 5:30 arrival I had other thoughts about Thalia — the normal thoughts of a bereaved widower.

I couldn't help but think what Thalia's reaction would have been to the afternoon crowds along that narrow, one-way street. Tiny, aggressive cars were honking and maneuvering into every gap, and ancient, dilapidated buses spewed thick exhaust. Thalia would have grabbed for a tissue and gagged. Then she would have said something like, "Couldn't they have looked ahead a little and realized that some day, with big cars and all, they'd need more room?" Poor dear Thalia, to whom history and logic meant nothing.

I was doing it again — thinking about her when I had decided to erase the ghost of Thalia from my life. That was, after all, what this trip was all about. I pulled up at a curb and rolled down the car window.

"*Por favor, senor... donde es el Hotel el Presidente?"* The lounging figure of a young man straightened slightly. He looked curiously at my car and then at me.

"Dos *cuadras*..." and he gestured ahead in the direction I was going.

"*Muchas gracias."*

I steered the car out into the honking traffic and a few minutes later pulled up in front of the former Convento de Santa Catalina, now another in the government's line of Hotels "El Presidente."

It was like walking into another century. Someone had been

clever enough to preserve the cloistered atmosphere of the convent. The rooms faced a quadrangle, in the middle of which was a courtyard. A fountain in its center splashed soothingly over a shrouded figure kneeling reverently at its side. Old stone pots full of bright flowers lined the walls. Original wall paintings of saints, faded but still discernible, caught my eye as I looked for my room number, and I promised myself a closer look after I had settled in.

Opening the door to my room I half expected to find a barren cell with a straw pallet in the corner. Instead, I found bright orange woolen drapes and bedspreads, fuchsia and yellow flowers against swirled white plaster walls, and dark, almost black rough-hewn woodwork and furniture. Things obviously had changed since the time the nuns inhabited this convent! Then immediately came the thought that had I said that to Thalia she would have agreed, very seriously.

There was a large mirror, framed in hand-worked tin, shining over the desk. Looking in it from the doorway I saw two beds, and then it struck me: out of force of habit I had asked for a twin-bedded room. It was too late now, and too embarrassing, to go back and change. Besides, they were busy with a busload of tourists which was why I had found my own room and carried my own bag. It didn't matter, this was probably a better, larger room, and I could afford it. But I kept looking at the empty bed, seeing Thalia's white American Tourister suitcase on it, just as I had seen it so many times in the past.

I remembered when the department store delivered that suitcase, brand-new. It was so large! I had teased Thalia about it, calling it a second cousin to a steamer trunk and questioning her ability to lift the thing when it was packed. "The question is," I had said, "can a ninety-nine-pound woman lift a one-hundred-pound suitcase!"

For Thalia had been tiny, and yet, ironically, she had had none of the qualities usually associated with diminutive women. Neither petite nor dainty nor perky, Thalia had just been tiny. Even her lovely name had been ironic. Thalia, the muse of comedy or merry poetry, had not smiled favorably on her namesake. A sickly child, an only child, Thalia had always depended on others to take care of her needs.

We both knew that lifting suitcases was my job, and I had seldom complained about the weight of her suitcase which always felt as though it were full of cement blocks. Over the years Thalia had remained the amateur traveler, packing heavy flatirons and hair dryers that, even with current converters, managed to blow fuses in hotels all over the world.

My own travel equipment has always been minimal — but I insist on the best quality in everything. My watch, for instance, must be water, shock, and magnetic resistant, and it must work with precision accuracy. The Gerard-Philippe I am wearing is a little masterpiece of

mechanism. I bought it in Geneva two summers ago, and I'm sure Thalia had no idea how much I paid for it. It is a quartz digital, in silver, with an unusual orange face.

Ah, memories! Automatically I chose the bed I would have taken had Thalia been with me. She always chose the one nearer to the bathroom. It was a little joke with us, but not always funny. "The closer I am to the bathroom," she used to say, "the better off I'll be." Poor Thalia! She was often plagued by car sickness, air sickness, and any other kind of motion sickness imaginable. After a day's travel I usually had to eat dinner alone, always staying in the hotel to be near her, and to take hot soup or tea back to the room.

Even on our trip to Florida, over ten years ago now, to attend my mother's funeral, Aunt Catherine had had to leave the service in the chapel to take care of Thalia. I had not been able to leave my mother's side as she lay in her white-satin-lined coffin, looking lovely and gracious, just as she had in life. I had remained at her graveside for hours, until they had insisted I leave and go back to Aunt Catherine's for some supper. Even there I found that Thalia was still resting and I had to eat alone. Tonight I would still have to eat alone — but not in the hotel. Tonight I would walk to the public square for Oaxacan food in a typical Mexican restaurant.

I chose one on the second floor, overlooking the square that was crowded with strollers, peddlers, and lovers who cuddled on the white-iron benches. Children played noisily around the fountain, chasing each other and getting wet from the spray when the wind blew. It was only seven, early for supper by Mexican standards. Most Mexicans were still digesting their four-o'clock small meal. Mexican restaurants, however, are not averse to serving dinner to foreigners at any hour, and my foreign stomach said it was dinnertime.

I chose the best table for two I could find, right next to the balcony railing. It occurred to me that there are never restaurant tables for *one* — always for a minimum of two. Maybe they were saying that no one should eat alone — everyone should have someone. This opened up a train of thought I was trying to avoid, so I concentrated on the menu.

Indulging my independent spirit — to say nothing of my strong stomach — I ordered the *polio mole,* chicken cooked in a sauce *picante* with a chocolate base. It was a strange combination I had always wanted to try. I had described it once to Thalia, but she had turned her head from the breakfast table. Just the contemplation of the ingredients in the national dish of Mexico had nauseated her.

The *mole* was delicious, almost black, and very thick. I could just barely taste the rich flavor of cocoa in its base. Combined with the exotic spices of the *salsa,* the chicken tasted like nothing else I had

ever eaten. I was determined now to order the *moles* in other parts of Mexico, for comparison to the Oaxacan, reportedly the richest and darkest of the lot.

Ah, this was Mexico! Four more weeks ahead of me, a comfortable, air-conditioned car, a money belt full of travelers' checks — the kind of vacation most people only dream of. If only Thalia could be here — but I must control those thoughts, even though they were natural for me.

Thalia's reactions and opinions were part of me. Hadn't I lived with her for fifteen years and traveled with her for five wonderful summers? Our life together had been what most people would call "normal." I taught geography at the local junior college, and Thalia puttered around the house. I wasn't fond of teaching, but as I jokingly said to colleagues, "It beats working!" At least I always had long summer vacation periods, and for five years now, Thalia's mother's money to spend on traveling.

What a time I had had getting Thalia interested in travel! When we were first married and her mother was still alive, they had both thought I was crazy to want to travel to foreign countries for a vacation.

For all their money, the farthest Thalia and her family had ever been from Akron, Ohio, was the Grand Canyon. Until her mother's death, after which I worked hard to introduce her to the joys of travel, Thalia thought the Grand Canyon was the end of the earth.

Well, all that had changed, and for five years now I had spent my semester break planning one exotic vacation after another. Making hotel and plane reservations, reserving rental cars and Jeeps, tracing on maps just where we would go and what we would see. At first Thalia had been enthusiastic. I suppose my own passion for travel was catching — at least, she tried to enter into the plans. She was, however, woefully ignorant in geography. Thalia couldn't even keep the continents straight; she was always confusing Africa and South America, and she couldn't find Australia to save her soul. "Oh, it's down there," she would say in surprise, when I finally pointed it out for her.

Those first trips were the fulfillment of life-long dreams for me. For Thalia — it was hard to tell *what* they were. Someone once told her that a trip abroad was like having a baby — difficult at the time, but afterward, well worth the trouble. That analogy appealed to Thalia, and she went around repeating it to everyone. The trouble was, each and every trip for Thalia was as difficult as the first one. In truth, Thalia had been far from the ideal companion for my travels. The wonders of the world were like Disneyland attractions to her, and her simple remarks had often been painfully embarrassing. There had

been that awful moment in the elevator at the Cairo Hilton last year.

We had just arrived and I was aching to jump in a cab and head for el Giza and the pyramids, but Thalia was exhausted from the plane trip, so I agreed to postpone going until morning. It was then that she said, in her high penetrating voice, “What time do the pyramids open, Harold?” The elevator had been crowded, and an amused titter passed through the car.

For five years, then, all went well. Last spring, however, when one day I received in the mail a fat manila envelope and started poring through folders on Mexico and Central America, I had seen a look of determination on her face. An unusual look for Thalia. She had set her little mouth as rigidly as she could, even though I could perceive a slight trembling at the corners, and said that *this* summer she intended to find a nice quiet lake resort — maybe in Wisconsin or Minnesota — where it would be cool and restful and where the most exotic dish served would be roast beef and mashed potatoes.

Having made her big announcement she had hurriedly left the room. She knew how easily I had always been able to change her mind, usually by pointing up the romantic aspects of a distant place. Moonlight on the pyramids, sunrise over the Acropolis. Even though she knew she would probably be seeing the moonlight or the sunrise from a sickbed, she had always given in to me. But not this time; her mind was made up.

I even tried to convince her that this would be our last foreign trip, that next summer I would help her to find that Wisconsin lake resort where we would sit and rock on a shady veranda and eat roast beef and apple pie every night of the week. She knew better, and so did I. There was no way I could have endured such a vacation, trapped in one spot and subjected to the kind of dull, insipid people who frequent such places. They would all, I thought, be exactly like Thalia.

So after five trips Thalia had had it. I couldn’t complain that she had been stingy with her mother’s money. It was all kept in her name, of course. Her mother had trained her well in the matter of hanging on to her own money. I really didn’t care, as long as Thalia was willing to finance our vacation trips. Traveling was all I had ever wanted out of life, and I had had five wonderful summers. But was I ready for it all to end? My appetite for travel was by no means assuaged; rather, it was heightened by what I had already seen. On my salary I would never be able to travel in style, for a whole summer, as I had been doing. The thought of a budget trip every two years depressed me.

Now my life had changed again, with the loss of my Thalia. It was still difficult for me to believe that she wasn’t with me on this trip,

that she was gone from this world. How strange, how final, is death... My travels could go on indefinitely now, of course. I tried to take comfort in that thought. I might even give up my job at the junior college. I had thought many times of traveling full-time. Why bother owning a home? It was just something to worry about and pay taxes on. There was enough of the world left for me to see, after Mexico and Central America. There was the entire Far East — and Russia! I might even put some of my adventures into a book, tell the world about the joys of travel.

All this I thought about while sitting on an iron bench in the charming little public square where I had gone after dinner. My thoughts drifted between the past and the present, which was a parade of colorfully dressed Mexicans, out for the evening in their very best. For some reason I glanced across the square just in time to see a black-and-white taxi take a fast corner and speed down Hidalgo Street. I jumped to my feet as though the bench were charged with electricity. In that brief glance at the taxi I had seen a white face looking through the rear window. The small face reminded me of a skull, but it was framed in fine, red hair — Thalia's face and Thalia's hair.

I sat down abruptly, trying to recover my composure. I hoped no one had seen my foolish action. The woman in the cab bore a striking resemblance to Thalia, that was all. There must be thousands of such women in the world. My heart was beating rapidly, though, over that shock of recognition. My knees trembled as I got up to walk back to the hotel.

Crossing the street, my mind was still full of Thalia, and I decided to visit the nearby cathedral to get her off my mind. Besides, the sky had become unusually dark, and people were scurrying along the streets, picking up their small children to hurry the process of getting home to shelter.

The huge carved wooden doors were ajar as I walked up the uneven stone steps. Flower sellers trying to make a last sale hurriedly offered me bright scarlet gladioluses to place on the shrines inside. I entered, my nostrils assailed by a mixture of scents — flowers, incense, burning wax. The hushed atmosphere was restful, and I slipped into the last pew. The altar was magnificent. Gold leafing covered all the pillars and niches where delicately sculptured statues stood, pure white and eyeless.

Glancing over to the side of the altar, my attention became riveted on one of the confessionals. A woman in the act of confessing was kneeling with her face almost completely covered by her hands. The curtains on both halves of the confessional booth were open, probably because of the heat. I could see the priest, a dark figure,

slumped in his seat, with his arms folded over his ample stomach.

The woman had the same color of hair, the same general build, the same white skin as Thalia's. She was even wearing a white dress that looked exactly like one Thalia had worn on our last trip. I sat watching her, telling myself that it was just another woman who happened to look like Thalia. Then, gradually, there was an impression of familiarity about her. I sat up straight in the pew. Those infinitely small details that make you identify a person subconsciously, from even a great distance, told me that the woman *was* Thalia!

I leaped to my feet for the second time that evening, almost calling out to her. Suddenly she was leaving, and very quickly. Never looking my way, she seemed to sense that I was approaching, and to fear me. She reached a side door and left through it with remarkable speed. I reached it seconds later, pushing the heavy door open roughly — but she was gone. I scanned every possible direction, but she had disappeared.

The sky was rumbling ominously now, and there wasn't a soul in sight. How had she reached cover without my seeing her? There must be some explanation ... I ran this way and that, trying to peer into the darkening shadows of the park and street. Reason told me this could not have happened, and yet it *had* happened. I felt sick, and for the first time wished I'd eaten a more conventional dinner.

I was completely alone on that dark deserted street as the rain began. I walked slowly because I felt dazed. I was being soaked to the skin by the steady downpour, but it didn't seem important. Trying to review the experiences of the evening, I attempted to put them into some kind of perspective. How could I have deluded myself that I saw a woman who was dead and... I almost stopped. I found myself facing something I had been avoiding for days — the circumstances of Thalia's death.

Why couldn't I remember just how it had come about? Accident? Illness? I imagined a deathbed scene with Thalia holding my hand. No, it hadn't happened that way. For some reason I thought of the flowers in the cathedral and in my mind I saw a funeral — a *real* funeral, not an imagined one. There were baskets of lilies and other flowers all banked around a coffin. Something told me that this funeral had taken place a long time ago — but Thalia's funeral must have been very recent, not more than a few weeks past...

Perhaps I was suffering from some kind of fever. I had been too over-confident about my resistance to illness when traveling. I wasn't getting any younger, and maybe my natural immunity to infection was wearing off. Yes, certainly these problems were based in the physical. My loss of memory was simply due to the shock of having lost my

wife; it would all come back to me one day soon. As for seeing Thalia tonight, I had never been subject to hallucinations before; it was undoubtedly the fever. Yes, the fever. I resolved to take my temperature as soon as I got back to the hotel.

I was feeling a little better when I got to my room, but the real blow was yet to come. Fumblingly I unlocked my door and entered. It was the first thing I saw — Thalia's white American Tourister suitcase. I managed to slam the door shut and then lean on it, gaping at that suitcase on the bed nearer to the bathroom. It looked so big — almost the width of the bed. It took every bit of self-discipline I had to refrain from turning and running out of the room.

After a minute I sank into a nearby chair, my wet suit clinging to my body, my eyes still glued to that suitcase. Where had it come from? Was it, after all, Thalia's? Other women traveled with similar suitcases. No, that wouldn't do. I could see part of a Hotel Royale label from Rome, torn in one corner. Other familiar nicks and scratches became visible as I continued to stare. Oh, it was Thalia's all right. But how had it got here? That suitcase was in my home in Akron, Ohio, shoved in the back of Thalia's closet. Of course it was there — and yet, it was here!

Somehow I had to pull the two facts together. One of them was obviously wrong. If the suitcase was here, it couldn't be at home. And it couldn't have come all this way by itself. Logical analysis came to my rescue and I felt better. By some bizarre set of circumstances Thalia's suitcase had been delivered here. By whom? Suddenly I thought of the bellboy. Before dinner he had knocked on the door to ask if he could bring in anything from the car. He apologized for not carrying my suitcase to my room earlier, but what can one do, he asked, raising his shoulders and rolling his eyes heavenward, when a bus with forty people arrives.

Yes, it was now coming back. I had smiled at the bellboy, knowing. that what he regretted was missing my tip. Had I said I needed something? Yes, now I remembered handing him my car keys and telling him to look in the trunk of the car for my camera case. I was afraid I had forgotten it because it wasn't in the back seat with other luggage. Traveling light, I might have tossed the camera case in the trunk without thinking, so had asked the bellboy to have a look.

I took a deep breath and continued my deductions. Yes, the bellboy had opened the trunk and had found — Thalia's suitcase! Wanting to bring in something to earn his tip, he had carried it to the room. But how had it got into the trunk compartment in the first place? My mind was a blank on that score. How could I have brought her suitcase with me, and then forgotten all about it? Was it packed? Empty?

Now that there was a rational explanation, at least for the presence of the suitcase, my mind was beginning to clear. Walking over to the bed, I grabbed it by the handle, half expecting it to be light — empty. But no, it took all my strength to drag it across the bedspread. I had to bend my knees in order to hoist it onto the floor. My God! The thing must weigh almost a hundred pounds.

The touch of that suitcase repelled me and I felt sick again as I staggered back to the chair. Holding my head in my hands, I felt anger rising in me. Why was my vacation being disrupted by that *thing* sitting over there? It had no place in my life any more. My mind was spinning — was I conscious or dreaming? So many pictures were racing through my mind now. I felt like a stranger, standing off to one side, looking at a movie.

There was the funeral again — the lilies, the coffin, the people sitting in the little chapel. Their blurred faces became clear for a moment, and I recognized them as relatives I hadn't seen for many years, relatives who were long dead. Suddenly I knew it was my mother's funeral I was seeing, not Thalia's. More vague pictures danced across my consciousness and then started to take shape, like a camera coming into focus.

There was Thalia sitting by the fireplace, reading the evening paper. The picture was so real. Someone was coming up behind her chair with a knife — look out, Thalia! I caught my breath. I couldn't see the face of the person with the knife clearly, but something gleamed on the wrist of that raised arm. It was a silver digital watch with an orange face. I think I cried out as the raised arm struck at the back of her neck—

At my sanity hearing they said they led me away screaming.

Grampaw Lends a Hand
by Robert J. Cloud

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Department of Second Stories

Robert J. Cloud's first story, "Creative Writing Course 205," appeared in our issue of September 1978. Once again we are amazed at the versatility of newcomers to the mystery field. Mr. Cloud's second story is completely different from his first — in theme, in tone, in touch. Read how Grampaw helped out at the gas station in the desert — the last chance to fill up on the road from Carson to Sybil...

It's a normal day out at the gas station. Traffic is not slow enough for bankruptcy, not heavy enough for hope. I'm beginning to realize why the last owner set the price so low. But what do I know? Young, green, I cashed my discharge check and government bonds and became an instant businessman. Also pump jockey, lube and oil man, purchasing agent, accountant and tax collector for Uncle Sam. Good thing it's a one-man show. Any more business, I'd have to hire an office manager.

And today I've got Grampaw. Usually I'm out here in the desert all alone, seven to seven, watching the occasional dust patches grow into cars that may or may not stop. Waiting and hoping, like a November spider waiting for those last flies. Working my crossword-puzzle magazine through the long waiting spells.

But today Grampaw is with me. Helping, he thinks, and why not let him think it? At his age you've got to feel that somebody needs you.

I did need him this morning. My car wasn't acting right. You know, I change spark plugs and fan belts, but I'm not a real mechanic. Anything that looks serious, I send folks up to Fred in Holofer. That's forty-five miles west, the nearest town. Certainly not a city, maybe not even a town, but what can you call a place that has four hundred people and is a hundred miles from the nearest place big enough for two banks? Anyway, this weekend I'll nurse my car up to Fred's and talk him into fixing it while I wait. For now Grampaw is with me.

He didn't mind at all winding up his old '39 pickup and hauling me all the way down here to work. Only thing, it took us an hour from the cabin he and I share, twenty-one miles up the draw. So we didn't

figure it was worth it for him to go home and then come back for me in the evening.

I think he looks on it as a real adventure. He rushes out and "helps" me when cars come in, not that it's so often he's really needed. In the early morning a few folks going in to Holofer want to gas up, or a few others heading out the long road to the Pass. Mostly these, the east-bound ones. It's another forty miles up that way to Burney, and about the same southeast to Hot Rock, and neither of those is anywhere the size of Holofer. That's supposed to be the big advantage of my place — Last Gas on the road from Carson to Sybil, over the Pass at the state boundary.

Like I say, a normal crummy day. Besides the guy who leans out his window and cusses if I spill a spoonful of gas alongside his tank and wants a free wash job to clean it up, besides the high school girl who needs just enough gas to get to Terrell and makes it 1.44 gallons, besides the lady who's sure the hose is putting terrible dents in her tailgate when I have to get clear around the car to gas up, besides them there are the jokers who notice Grampaw's old pickup setting there in the sun where my car usually is and make sarcastic cracks about "trading up" or "adding a sideline of antiques."

But Grampaw seems to enjoy it. So I let him help. It's been so long since he could feel useful, he wants to overdo it. Looks under everybody's hood, checks the oil and transmission fluid, washes the windows, levels up the tire pressures. I tell you, "You start doing that, everybody's going to expect it," and he says, "What's the harm?"

"Well, for one thing, all that water you're washing windows with, that costs money to haul up here. And the labor — you could gas up three cars and get them out in the time you're fiddling around one car."

Then he says, "What three cars? All I ever see is one at a time. And what labor? You're sitting here all day anyway."

He never does see my point.

So I humor him. What the heck, he's giving me a ride to work until I can get my car fixed. Let him play at helping me.

Mostly we sit inside, out of the sun, for it gets hot soon down here and stays hot a long time. You don't want to put in much time outside during the day. A man walking could die. Even a man stuck in a broken-down car could get pretty parboiled waiting for one of the occasional drivers to come by and help. So we sit inside, with both doors open, working the puzzle magazine or leafing through the old Handy Mechanix magazines, or listening to the radio.

Not really listening. Sitting out here alone, day after day, month after month, I just let it run all day. Five minutes of news, fifty-five of cowboy songs, just for the company. It's a friendly noise to let you

know there's somebody else alive somewhere in the world besides you. I keep it tuned way down. First thing Grampaw does, when we're settled in with the displays out front and the pop machine plugged in and the pumps unlocked, is turn up the radio. I argue with him a bit, but it's already too hot for that, so we compromise. Too loud for me, too soft for him. After a while I don't hear it anyway. It's just there.

We get through the day about as well as I ever get through it. Have a little run of business between seven and eight, then a long slow spell till about noon. Then a few cars straggle by, mostly ranch wives heading into Holofer. I'm working my puzzles and Grampaw is propped up in the corner with his head against the radio. Then slow again.

Along about three, just heading into the hottest part of the day, this sedan pulls in. Four-five years old, dusty, two men in the front. I lay down the puzzle book and start for the pumps, because I'm the guy in the uniform and cap, but Grampaw comes to life and trots out ahead of me.

"Fill 'er up?" he chirps. "Regular or premium?" We're supposed to say it that way, because the driver has to answer regular or premium, and unless he remembers to say otherwise, you go ahead and fill her up. Where if he stopped to think on it, about the price and his distance and all, he'd probably want only half as much. So Grampaw has the hose out quick as the man says, "Premium."

Grampaw sets the pump on slow-automatic, and hauls the water hose and chamois around to the front. There he goes to work on the windshield.

"Lotta bugs on the glass," he says, "makes it pretty hard to see." The guys inside just look at him without moving or speaking. Might as well be dead, for all the action they show.

Grampaw is around the side with the water. "Roll up your windows and I'll clean the glass all around," he says. "Man can never have it too clean for safe driving." The driver looks at him, hesitates a second, then rolls up the window. His partner does the same.

Grampaw works his way slowly all around that car with the hose, peering and polishing. I never see anybody do such a thorough job. He even scours the brake-lights and license plates. Finally he's at the front again, where he shuts off the water and opens the hood. He pulls out the oil dipstick and shows it to the driver. "You're down a quart and a half. Long hot drive ahead, up there to the Pass, and there's no other station till the other side. You better take two quarts. What's she burn?"

The driver moves his mouth enough to say, "Ten-W." Grampaw gets the oil and runs it into the motor. While he's running in the second quart, the gas hose clangs off. Grampaw looks up at the dial

and says to the driver, “That’s fourteen eighty for the gas and two ninety-five for the oil.”

The driver never looks at him, but paws in his pocket and comes up with a twenty. “Keep it,” he mutters.

“Thank’ee kindly, sir,” Grampaw says. “I’ll just get your water while we’ve still got the hood up. This car’s been running hot, and you’ll be needing water.”

He removes the radiator cap, and I see the water level is down a bit, but not dangerous. Grampaw sticks the running hose* in the neck, then feels around under the bottom of the radiator.

“What’re you doing?” I asked him.

“Just checking the connections,” he answers.

“Remember that water isn’t free,” I tell him, and would like to say more, but a little yellow hatchback pulls in and I go over to service it. The driver is a college-age girl, better looking than I usually see around these parts, with a breezy air and not much on in the way of clothes. Grampaw’s watching the sedan fading away down the road, and I’m glad for once he isn’t right there helping. This one I can take my time on.

When I get back inside, Grampaw’s hanging up the phone. I’m surprised, because he doesn’t know anybody but me around here, and I never hear him getting calls while we’re at home evenings.

“Just had a little business,” he says, sort of smug, at my stare.

“Business?” I repeat.

“Business. Could have been yours. You know, Dick, you’d have more business yourself if you’d be a little more observant.” He settles back in the corner, and I pick up the puzzle book again. Then I lay it down.

“You know, Grampaw, I could also make out better if people weren’t wasting my hard-bought water all over half of Creation. If that guy’d wanted his car washed, he could’ve asked, and we could’ve charged him for it. I saw streaks of water clear from our station up onto the highway after he’d left.”

“Yep, and beyond that, most likely. It’s all in a good cause,” Grampaw says. Then he adds, “You could take it out of my tip. Two dollars ought to cover it.” He looks at me and chuckles, like he’s put over a good one.

Well, business runs its usual pace, slow to stopped, till five, when we start looking for the cars coming home from Holofer. And even they aren’t much to hold a parade over. Grampaw looks up the east road to the Pass quite a bit, like he’s expecting more. But I know there won’t be much from that way.

Along about seven, while we’re rolling in the tires and locking up the pumps, Grampaw looks up the road one more time and says,

“Here they come.”

By the time I can turn around and say, “Who comes?” they’re here — a State Patrol car with two husky young officers about my size and age but looking a lot better fed.

“Mr. Connelly?” one asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“That’s me,” says Grampaw.

The two patrolmen look us over and turn to Grampaw. “Turns out you were right,” the driver says. “We got ’em. The state thanks you, and the bank’ll thank you after the conviction.”

Grampaw beams. “Yessiree, I thought it might be them. And I figured couldn’t be no harm in trying, at least. Glad you got ’em.”

The other patrolman says, “We did just as you said. Came a-barreling along with the flasher on until we were close enough to be sure it was the same car. Then we turned off the flasher and just sat in behind at a steady fifty-four until they broke down. They were too smart to run for it, just held fifty-four until she boiled over and died in a big cloud of steam. We walked up while they were getting out, and checked the car. Briefcase under the seat just like you said.”

Grampaw says, “I thought it could be them. Our radio had said the bank over at Carson was robbed and everybody was searching west towards the big Coast cities. But nothing had turned up. I figured a smart bandit would go the other way. And the radio said all they knew of the license was a G and a 3 somewhere, medium-old nondescript car.”

“You pegged it,” the trooper says. “But that’s not much to go on, you know. You could have gotten into trouble.”

“Oh,” Grampaw says, “I had other evidence. Both these fellows sat still as stone — never moved, hardly spoke. Trying too hard to be inconspicuous, like a jackrabbit when he knows there’s coyotes around. And they let me talk them into rolling up the windows — in all this heat — and giving them a really long window-wash job. And never kicked when I overcharged forty cents on the gas.

“And,” he turned to me, “you saw him give me a twenty-dollar bill. Now how many people hand out cash money, and how many show a credit card and sign a slip, on an average day?” He smiled at the trooper. “I felt pretty sure. And if I was wrong, you’d be right there to help them, and nobody hurt, so that would be all right too.”

The troopers headed for their car, but one turned.

“Oh, say,” he says to Grampaw, “you know what was the funniest? While we were waiting for the county wagon to take them off our hands, one of them asked, ‘What put you onto us, anyway?’ and I said, ‘Mister, you’ve got the cleanest license plates in nine counties,’ and his partner said, ‘That old goat! I knew he was too good

to be true.' "

"Old goat," Grampaw repeats thoughtfully. "Old goat. Well, I thank'ee for coming back with the information. It sets my mind at ease." He gives them a snappy little World War One salute, and they drive away grinning.

"Grampaw," I ask while we're jouncing home in his '39 pickup, "you told them how you figured it might be the robbers, but how'd you know they'd be able to catch them in time? Unless there were troopers waiting right around the bend, which has never been true in my lifetime, those guys could have easily made the Pass."

"Oh, that," Grampaw chuckles. "I figured they'd have a breakdown somewhere up the road, and would be glad to see anybody coming, even cops. When I was fooling around under the radiator, I opened the drain-cock just a little mite."

Ellery Queen's Mystery Newsletter

Crime Beat
by R. E. Porter

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MYSTERY CONTEST: Prize contests sponsored by publishers were once a fairly common part of the business, and at least one publisher even held an annual contest for the best mystery novel. We haven't seen many contests lately, and that's why it's a special pleasure to note the announcement of the Scribner Crime Novel Award, to be given to the best first novel by an American author or a permanent resident of the United States.

The award will be $7,500, consisting of a $2,500 cash prize and a $5,000 advance against royalties, with the winner announced early in 1982. Books may be classic detective stories, historical reconstructions, fictionalized true crime, espionage, police procedural, or private-eye novels. The only categories specifically ruled out are the supernatural and pastiches or parodies — Sherlockian or otherwise. The manuscripts submitted must be complete, and addressed to Charles Scribner's Sons, 597 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Envelopes should be marked for the Scribner Crime Novel Award. Deadline for submissions is September 30, 1981.

Scribners has a long history of launching successful mystery novelists, having published S. S. Van Dine, Dorothy Salisbury Davis, Simon Brett, and P. D. James. The publisher hopes its contest will encourage new authors, and will offer to publish other acceptable first novels in addition to the prize winner.

LITERARY DETECTIVE WORK: Until now it was generally believed that only three novels were published by the highly regarded pulp writer Raoul Whitfield (one of whose stories was reprinted in *EQMM's* April 22nd issue). Now author Bill Pronzini has engaged in some literary detective work to establish that Whitfield published two other mystery novels during his lifetime — *Five* (1931) and *Killer's Carnival* (1932) — both under the pseudonym of "Temple Field."

Pronzini thought the characters in a *Black Mask* serial, "Laughing Death" by Raoul Whitfield, sounded familiar. He compared the text with a copy of *Five* and found the stories were identical. Further investigation revealed that the second Temple Field novel, *Killer's Carnival,* was also serialized in Black Mask as "The Skyline Murders" by Whitfield. No doubt they'll be joining Whitfield's previously known mystery novels, *Green Ice, Death in a Bowl,* and *The Virgin Kills,* in future bibliographies.

FATHER BROWN DISCOVERY: Speaking of discoveries, the G. K. Chesterton Society has come up with a dandy — an unknown Father Brown story written by Chesterton in collaboration with a British magazine publisher back in 1914. The publisher, Sir Max Pemberton, wrote part one of "The Donnington Mystery" for the October 1914 issue of his magazine, *Premiere.* Chesterton wrote part two the following month, in which Father Brown solves the mystery.

Both parts were reprinted for the first time in the February 1981 issue of *The Chesterton Review.* Subscription to the quarterly journal is $12.00 a year, from *The Chesterton Review,* 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, Canada S7N OW6.

TELEVISION PILOTS: Ed McBain is working on the pilot show for a possible new television series about the 87th Precinct. An earlier series ran for thirty weeks on NBC-TV back in 1961.

And another new TV pilot, *Murder Ink*, involves a woman bookstore owner whose husband is a policeman. The pilot, directed by John Avildsen (who made *Rocky),* was filmed at New York's Mysterious Bookshop in February.

POLICE PHOTOS: A new trade paperback by photographer Leonard Freed, *Police Work* (Touchstone, $9.95), brings together 124 stark black-and-white photos of New York police officers going about their daily business. Captions are minimal, and the photos speak eloquently of the dangers and rewards of police work.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: An unusual and perceptive European view of the mystery is contained in *The Whodunit: An Informal History of the Detective Story,* by Italian writers Stefano Benvenuti and Gianni Rizzoni. The heavily illustrated trade paperback will be published by Macmillan in November, complete with a Who's Who section of leading authors and characters. A final chapter on contemporary writers from an American viewpoint has been added to the original text.

One of the unjustly neglected writers of the 1940s, Matthew Head (pseudonym of art critic John Canaday), will be available again in paperback when Harper & Row reprints *The Cabinda Affair* and *Murder at the Flea Club* in June.

Coming from Ticknor & Fields this fall will be two unusual collections — the first gathering of P. G. Wodehouse's crime tales, *Wodehouse on Crime,* edited by Don Bensen with an Introduction by Isaac Asimov, and *Critical Observations,* a collection of criminous and literary essays by Julian Symons.

It's a big year for fans of Robert B. Parker's Boston private eye, Spenser. In February there was *Early Autumn,* and coming in July (also from Delacorte) is the new Spenser novel, *A Savage Place.*

Bloody Visions
by Chris Steinbrunner

© 1981 by Chris Steinbrunner

The colossal failure of the stage play *Frankenstein*, which recently opened and closed at New York's Palace Theater in a single evening, has become a Broadway legend: with a price tag well over two million dollars, it was the costliest disaster in American theater history. It was also an ambitious undertaking, a titantic drama of murder and vengeance so visually stunning it deserved a better fate. As EQMN was present during much of its pre-opening difficulties and talked with many of its creative participants, we will try to stage this spectacular-but-doomed production for you in the theater of the mind.

The show is eye-filling from the very first scene: a gigantic glacier cliff looms over the stage, almost lost in swirling snow, while struggling near its edge lumbers first Frankenstein's monster and then his creator, Victor. We see them for a moment, then they disappear. (Few in the audience realized that the figures trudging across the ice are actually life-size puppets — the only way the effect could be achieved.) Mist and smoke obscure the stage, and we are suddenly in a Swiss village churchyard as a ghastly moon looks down on two grave-robbers about their grisly work. (The swiftness of the scene-changes is possible because the cavernous Palace Theater has a gigantic revolving stage.)

The next scene is Victor's baronial home, massive doors and French windows sloping upward to vaulted ceilings in dizzying false perspective. The young scientist is anxious about his approaching marriage and the secret experiments he is conducting in the cellars beneath the castle tower. The subterranean laboratory with its giant vials filled with colored fluids, crackling electrodes, and sparkling, smoking reactors is mind-boggling: here, amid slashes of lightning bolting down from the tower's open battlements, he brings his creation to life and it escapes.

We find the creature next stumbling toward a blind hermit's cottage deep in a forest. The hermit (John Carradine) befriends him, teaches him to read from the Bible, but in the next scene is killed by the villainous grave-diggers as the creature flees again and the cottage burns to the ground onstage! And that's just the *first* act.

After intermission we follow the now maddened creature on a single-minded course of vengeance against his creator — embittered because Victor cannot bring himself to construct a mate to relieve the

monster's loneliness. In yet another forest setting he kills Victor's young brother, a crime for which the governess Justine is accused and hung. He kills Victor's best friend and aide, Henry, and on the night of Victor's wedding murders his bride, Elizabeth. The bedchamber setting, Gothic and looming, where the creature bursts through a vast hanging tapestry, is a knockout. Finally we descend to the cellar once more, as Victor and his creation are destroyed when the laboratory explodes and the castle walls come crashing down. Much of the production's $2-million budget went to elaborate, gargantuan stage wizardry — harking back actually to the melodrama theater before the invention of the movies, where chariot races and burning mills were often scenic treats — but on a sweep and scale never seen on Broadway before.

The play's young author, Victor Gialanella, told EQMN that he hoped this first effort (produced originally at a St. Louis regional theater, but without any spectacle) would last perhaps as long as the recent Broadway revival of *Dracula.* Alas, *Dracula* seemed to thrive on undercurrents of erotic camp, while Gialanella's *Frankenstein* was a straight, sober tale of murderous revenge. "I go much closer to the Mary Shelley story than any movie version; none of the movies have ever done the book properly," he declares with pride — yet surely the pyrotechnical laboratory scenes were more inspired by Universal Pictures than Shelley, and the play ignores the book's climactic death on the ice-floes as well.

The play was in trouble from the start. Because of the massive sets it could not undergo out-of-town tryouts; at one point the New York Fire Department closed it down because of the hazardous electrical effects; the actor playing Victor was replaced (by David Dukes, the killer Sinatra stalked in *The First Deadly Sin).* Finally, the major critics savaged it as just another melodrama enlivened by high-voltage staging.

The producers decided there were not enough advance sales to risk keeping the play open. But it *was* fun (with almost as many murders as *Sweeney Todd)* and might have caught on. Sad that such an electrifying theatrical disaster — one that will be remembered for years to come — was an attempt to revive the bloody visions of melodramatic stage spectacle.

Interview: Jack Ritchie (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: You share your birthday, February 26th, with Victor Hugo, Buffalo Bill Cody, Jackie Gleason, Johnny Cash, Godfrey Cambridge, and George Randolph Chester. What do you think of that?

RITCHIE: I do vaguely remember staring at a calendar as a child and seeing Buffalo Bill's picture in my place. Victor Hugo? As a teenager, I happened to be reading his *1793* when suddenly the world before me began jumping up and down and acting crazy. I thought I was having a stroke of some kind, but it turned out that I was merely suffering eye spasms and needed glasses badly.

Jackie Gleason, Johnny Cash, and Godfrey Cambridge, I, of course, recognize. But who in the world is George Randolph Chester? Has he ever been to Sheboygan?

EQMN: You attended Milwaukee Teachers' College before entering the army during World War II. Did you ever teach school?

RITCHIE: I attended Milwaukee State Teachers' College because, at that time, it was the only public four-year college in Milwaukee. I could go there and still room and board at home. It was then the practice of many students to go there for two years, taking a general course, and then — after they'd also been working part time, saving money, and living at home — to transfer to the University of Wisconsin in Madison for the last two years and a more prestigious sheepskin.

The admissions people at Milwaukee State Teachers' were well aware of this practice and did their best to discourage it. They made it just about necessary to swear on the Bible that you *really*, but *really*, intended to remain there for the full four years and become a teacher before they would admit you.

I only half lied. I had no intention of ever, ever becoming a teacher, but on the other hand I wasn't going to switch to Madison after two years either. I just didn't want to be pushed into the work force so soon after high school.

After the war, I tried going back to college under the G. I. Bill, but it didn't work out. I was also in no particular hurry to go anywhere and I figured that after 3 years, 3 months, and 21 days — but who counts? — in the army I was due for a long vacation. So I settled for working in my father's tailor shop for room and board. I've always suffered from a sinful lack of ambition. All I've ever really wanted was a quiet day, no fuss, and time to myself.

It wasn't really a bad life at all, but eventually I was forced to

face the fact that the tailor shop wouldn't go on forever and neither would my father. And I wasn't all that keen to take over the shop anyway. My father would say — in continuing astonishment — "I've been a tailor for forty years, and I *still* don't like it."

EQMN: How did you come to write?

RITCHIE: At about this time, my mother, as a hobby, joined a local writer's club and one thing led to another and she got an agent, Larry Sternig. I had never given serious thought to writing before. Up until that time I had never written anything at all except for a few themes at school. When I got A's it was usually for neatness.

But there I was in my early thirties and it was about time I settled upon some congenial trade. So I sat down and wrote a sports story about an ambidextrous pitcher and when Larry showed up one day to talk to my mother I handed him the story. He had that "Oh, God, everybody thinks he can write" expression on his face. But he showed up the next day with a smile and that started the whole thing. I decided I'd write 50 short stories, one a week, while still working in the tailor shop, and if none of them sold during that year, then the hell with it. The eighth story sold and that settled the question. So did most of the other seven eventually, including the sports story.

EQMN: Where did Larry make that first sale?

RITCHIE: To the now defunct *New York Daily Mirror*, for fifty bucks. That was large money in those days.

EQMN: And you're still with the Sternig Agency.

RITCHIE: Yes. I've always regarded Larry as much a friend as an agent. And perhaps I've just been fortunate or Larry's an exceptional person, but I think that a writer should stick with one agent. So many writers, it seems, change agents like hats, and I don't think it pays off in the long run.

The Jury Box
by Jon L. Breen

© 1981 by Jon L. Breen

For a decade before his creation of Perry Mason, Erie Stanley Gardner was one of the best and most prolific contributors to the pulp magazines, usually but not always in the mystery-detective genre. Two new collections of his pulp novelettes demonstrate the deceptive versatility of a writer many associate only with the Mason and Cool-Lam formulae.

**** Erle Stanley Gardner: *The Amazing Adventures of Lester Leith,* edited and with an Introduction by Ellery Queen, Dial Press, $9.95. Leith, who solves crimes by reading the newspaper accounts and then concocts elaborate schemes to appropriate the loot (20 % for himself, 80 % for charity), is one of Gardner's best series characters. He can be likened to a juggler or a magician, and his adventures are triumphs of misdirection as surely as the works of John Dickson Carr and Clayton Rawson. He accomplishes his Robin Hood exploits despite the presence in his employ (as valet) of a police spy.

These five cases have not appeared in any previous Gardner collections. The sixty to seventy uncollected Leith stories must include enough good ones to fill several more volumes, and I hope they will.

*** Erle Stanley Gardner: *The Human Zero: The Science Fiction Stories of Erie Stanley Gardner*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh, Morrow, $12.95. Though all seven of these novelettes (from *Argosy*, 1928–1932) are creditable examples of the pulp writer's craft, the urban s.f.-detective hybrids (the title story and "A Year and a Day"), reminiscent of some of Murray Leinster's early work, will probably interest mystery readers more than the Burroughs-type jungle adventure yarns. The one interplanetary tale, "The Sky's the Limit," is the weakest of the group.

*** Patricia Moyes: *Angel Death,* Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, $10.95. Scotland Yard's Henry Tibbett gets plenty of vacations, but he is no more successful than any other fictional detective in managing a crime-free holiday. He and Emmy again visit the fictitious British Seaward Islands and become involved in a complicated and dangerous drug-trade case. This is more a thriller — rather in the Tuppence and Tommy mode — than a formal detective story, but Moyes' writing is as charming as ever.

*** James McClure: *The Blood of an Englishman,* Harper and Row, $10.95. The greatest attractions of the Kramer-Zondi series are the

characters and the trenchant observations on South African society. But with the social commentary, McClure offers plots as intricately constructed and detective work as carefully described as a practitioner from the formalist Thirties.

*** Doris Shannon: *The Punishment,* St. Martin's, $12.95. In a compelling and cunningly crafted novel of horror, the Quiller family (an odd assortment indeed) hold a family reunion on a remote island off the coast of Maine — in an old house with a history of violent death and depravity. Shannon will keep you reading, but my gothic consultant thought the climax was marred by one Talent too many.

*** Victor Canning: *Fall from Grace,* Morrow, $9.95. One question is at the center of this book: has the charming sociopath, John Corbin, a poetry-quoting sometime writer working on a history of the family gardens for a Church of England bishop, really been reformed by love, or is he still (as we somehow hope) the despicable rogue we met at the outset of the novel? As always, Canning's writing is smooth, civilized, and eminently readable.

*** John Wainwright: *Man of Law,* St. Martin's, $9.95. Two college friends — one now a Q.C., the other a psychiatric expert witness — do courtroom battle. The usual twists and turns of a Wainwright plot are here in abundance, though his trial may demand quite a bit of artistic license.

*** David Williams: *Murder for Treasure,* St. Martin's, $9.95. The proposed takeover of Rigley's Patent Footbalm by an American conglomerate brings banker-sleuth Mark Treasure to Wales. Williams delivers a measure of wit, action, and puzzle-plotting worthy of the British answer to Emma Lathen's John Putnam Thatcher.

*** Joe L. Hensley: *Outcasts,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $9.95. The novels about midwestern lawyer Donald Robak seem to be getting better and better. Hensley's writing is marked by an ability to capture character with precision and economy. The murderer here is interesting and surprising but takes some believing.

** Tom Murphy: *Auction,* Signet, $2.95. This is a good honest job in the "bestseller" genre, featuring a well rendered background of a New York auction house, mini-series dialogue, stock characters presented in detail if not depth, and the usual blockbuster padding. The fairly predictable latter stages would benefit from more mystery. The novel is fun to read but ultimately delivers less than its 400-page length warrants.

John Dunning's *Looking for Ginger North* (Fawcett-Gold Medal, $1.95), missed by this department on its appearance over a year ago, may be tough to find now, but it's worth the effort. Besides an intriguing plot, it offers the best and most believable depiction of a racetrack backstretch and its people I've found in any mystery novel.

Mr. Smith and Myrtle
by Nedra Tyre

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A short story by Nedra Tyre

We are indebted to Edith Wyatt of Decatur, Georgia, for calling to our attention a remarkable book — Nedra Tyre's RED WINE FIRST, *published in 1947, and long out of print. The title of the book comes from Sean O'Casey's* THE SILVER TASSIE: *"Red wine first, Jessie, to the passion and the power and the pain of life."*

"The people in [*Nedra Tyre's*] *book all talk to someone called a case worker... These, then, are conversations of persons who happened to be clients of social agencies sometime during the years 1940-45. They lived and died in three of the Southern states."*

The first of these stories — "sketches, conversations, whatever one wants to call them" — fully illustrates the quotation from Sean O'Casey...

I reckon what I done was years coming. Yet it looked like it was just all of a sudden. I keep telling myself it happened suddenlike and I was outa my mind, then I remember all the little things all my life long and I know they was just being packed one on top of the other and being shoved and pushed inside like a trunk or a suitcase that can't hold no more.

They was just the two of us, me and Myrtle. Look like the Lord tried Hisself to make her pretty and me ugly. I was tall and gawky and you can't see around my nose. I ain't got much chin. Ain't nothing right about me. And Myrtle, well, she was just about perfect. Black hair and a round smiling face. She had as pretty a figger as you could find and, Lord, from the time she was two every man she passed on the street was flirting with her. She didn't care nothing for them, just grinned at them, said oh go on about your business, and they loved her even more. By the time she was eleven, she'd as soon tell a man to go to hell as to look at him straight.

I was three years older. I remember her fifteenth birthday, was the last time I ever tried to stay around the house when she was there with boys. They hovered over her and laughed with her and I just set there.

After that, as I say, I didn't stay around her none, but I done a mighty funny thing. I'd stay in the kitchen and I'd hear all the fun

going on and look like I couldn't stand to be left out. What I done was to bore me a hole in the door and watch them. I reckon it wasn't nice to spy on them like that but looked like I didn't have no choice.

Mama and papa was always proud of Myrtle and the way she looked. Myrtle'd cry for things I had and mama'd say, give it to the baby, you're a big girl now and ought not to want nothing like that to play with. You ain't going to let your little sister cry, are you, just because you're too stingy to give her that doll?

Papa got without work and it was up to me to earn what I could. Stopped school when I was in the sixth grade and went right to work in a department store in the stockroom. Well, I was there six years when it happened. Now understand, Mr. Smith wasn't the handsomest man that ever lived and breathed and I wouldn't try to make you believe it. Face was kinda like a rat's, but he was just plain nice. Talked to me like he thought a awful lot of me. Every night I'd get down on my knees and thank God for letting Mr. Smith speak to me like I was a woman. I wanted to reach out my hand to Mr. Smith, to give him presents, to do everything to show him what it meant to me that he treated me like a woman. It was wonderful the first time he taken me to a movie — was wonderful of course every time after that — and helt my hand. For so long it had seemed to me that every girl alive had moren me and then there it was, everything handed to me on a silver platter.

Well, it went on like that for some time. He never said a word to me about love or nothing. I wanted him so much. It was all shining on my face, the way I loved him. I'd try to bring his name in the conversation, no matter where I was. I'd say, now Mr. Smith, the floorwalker up on the first floor, thinks it's going to be a good year for the Republicans. Anything to keep his name before me, anything to hold onto my love.

Then one morning mama said to me, I know you love him. Lord, anybody could tell I loved him.

So one night I got my courage up and I invited him home to supper. Mama really done her best. She was a mighty good cook. It was real nice. Papa put on a tie and for oncet we got him to wear his falst teeth and we set around laughing and talking. Myrtle was out on a date. We had a mighty comfirtible evening. Papa setting there picking his falst teeth and mama settled in her rocking chair with her hands on her stomach, smiling.

In a little while papa started yawning and saying well come on maw let's leave it to the young folks and we left the dining room and went on in the sitting room.

Mr. Smith and me set down on the sofa. Mr. Smith and me was all alone, first time I'd ever been alone with him, before we always went

to the show together or to some place to eat with lots of people around. I felt as if I was looking at him for the first time. The floor lamp was lit way on the other side of the room and it was all just as nice as anybody'd ever want. I was trying not to be too bold and brazen.

Mr. Smith finely reached over to me same as if it was the most natural thing in the world and taken my hand. Then he just sorta drawed me over to him and kissed me.

I reckon they's just some folks the Lord don't want to have no pleasure. Here this wonderful thing come into my life. I shoulda known wasn't meant for me.

After a while Mr. Smith said, well it's getting late and you've got to get your beauty sleep. He got up and walked over to the console table and taken his hat off it. He just sorta waved and said thanks for a very nice evening and tell your mother that was just about the nicest apple pie I ever put in my mouth.

I heard him close the door and then I heard Myrtle come in the hall. I reckon she musta said something to him but I couldn't hear their voices. Then she walked into the living room and said, well you've got a feller. I looked hard at her and I knowed she was adding in her mind though not coming out and saying it, well who'd a thought you coulda done it. She smiled a very funny smile. I never thought much about it. Not then.

After that, looked like Mr. Smith ignored me. Then about two weeks later there was Mr. Smith waiting in the living room when I come home and I said in a very surprised and funny way, well I declare, Mr. Smith, I wasn't expecting to see you here. I was trying to be offhand. I said, it's mighty nice of you to come by and there's a good show on at the Capitol and I was wondering if you had in mind going to see it.

Well, he hummed and hawed and sorta spewed around and said he'd just dropped by to say hello. All the time his eyes was darting round same as if his mind was somewhere else. Right then and there Myrtle opened the door. She looked past me to Mr. Smith and she said, I'm sorry, Jack honey, for keeping you waiting like this but that damned Mr. Alton thinks he owns me body and soul just because he pays me fifteen dollars a week. I just couldn't get away a minute sooner. She didn't look at me not oncet except when she and Mr. Smith left out of the front door and then she give me a look like she used to give me when I'd handed over a doll to her because mama made me.

I wanted to die and my body to rot. I felt like a pore old meowing cat out in the rain.

I couldn't stop thinking of Mr. Smith. At the store my eyes

followed him every step he taken. I changed my lunch hour on account of between one and two he come downstairs and was near the stockroom, relieving the basemint floorwalker. He would say, hello Ruby, but never a word about walking in the park or a movie or nothing.

I used to haunt the streets trying to track him and Myrtle down. If I coulda just stood outside myself I reckon I coulda seen how foolish it all was, me a mourning over a man that had no use for me, when they was so many other men in the world.

I wanted Mr. Smith and I couldn't hep myself. Even sleeping I couldn't get him outa my mind. Wasn't no other thought nowhere I could get holt of. And I'd come home every night to find him in the living room waiting for Myrtle. Didn't even have the grace to meet her somewheres downtown.

Things kept on like that for some little time. Then I reckon it was about the prettiest spring night I ever seen. I couldn't bear it inside and I went walking down the street. I taken my time about coming back. Well, when I finely got back home there was mama and papa in the living room and Mr. Smith and Myrtle, and mama saying now then Ruby where you been that you wasn't home to get the most important news we've had anytime lately? Guess what, Mr. Smith and Myrtle is getting married.

Papa nudged me and said, well now you'll be the next one Ruby, and then he whooped and hollered and showed all his gums. I just said to myself, I got my pride, I can't break down here, so I said, well I'm sure I hope you'll both be very happy. Myrtle said, we ain't gonna have no fine wedding, we're gonna drive out somewheres dost by and get married, then we'll come home and you can have a good supper for us, mama. Why don't you have fried chicken, always said nobody in the world can fry chicken like you.

I wish they'd been somebody I coulda talked to that week while they was waiting to be married. I'd think, oh God, this can't be true, he's my only love. I'd even try to think of things that would make me feel good like maybe Myrtle would jilt him or maybe she would get killed or just up and die, but then it was Saturday afternoon and time for them to drive away and I realized wasn't nothing gonna take my misery from me. I was gonna have to face it without a single human being knowing what I was going through.

The neighbors come by to look at Myrtle before she and Mr. Smith left to be married, said they never seen nothing so pretty in their lives. I just set down in the sitting room after they left and I had about the spine-tingliest feeling anybody could ever have. There was somebody in my place that had no right to be there.

And then bless goodness they was back before you could say Jack

Robinson, Mr. Smith saying well, it don't take much time for you to get into these things but just let me see you try to get out of it. Myrtle laughed, said well talk for yourself, just don't you let me see you trying no tricks. And Mr. Smith said, well you talk mighty sassy for a little old married woman.

I kep wanting them to leave and let me waller in my misery. I thought they'd go on a honeymoon.

But we eat the chicken supper mama had fixed and we set around for a while and Mr. Smith looked at Myrtle right sheepish and said well for a old married man I feel mighty tired and I guess we might as well turn in.

They had no intentions of leaving, they was going to sleep in the same house with me. Walls in that old house was paper-thin. I could hear them and I heard Mr. Smith say reckon they're all asleep, and Myrtle said you bet they are and even if they're not they's some things that ought not to be put off no longer.

Then I never heard the like and it went on and on and I kep thinking I can't stand it no longer. I couldn't think of a thing but just that it's gotta stop, they mighta had the common decency to go away, they got no business here they gotta stop. Then a wilder thought than that come and I wasn't realizing what I was doing, I was just wild and crazy like a demon couldn't nothing have stopped me, and I jumped outa bed and I run to the kitchen and I grabbed up a butcher knife and I went tearing into their room and they didn't even notice me. I taken the butcher knife and I slit Mr. Smith's throat.

Myrtle jumped up and shoved him away from her. She scrambled up somehow and tried to get to the door but I was too quick for her and I grabbed her around the neck and cut her throat. The blood spurted all over her nekkid body and onto my nightgown and I was laughing, and there was Mr. Smith groaning over there in the bed and flailing around like a chicken when it's dying.

I remember he kep saying Ruby, Ruby, for God's sake stop, and even then I believe he coulda roused me outa what I was doing if he had just said Ruby, you don't know what you're doing, you're just unhappy because we've been thoughtless and I oughta realized how you musta felt, please forgive me. But he didn't. He snarled at me, you ugly devil, damn your soul.

I seen then they wasn't breathing any more, and then I done the queerest thing. I went into the bathroom. There wasn't a drop of hot water, never was, but I filled the tub full of cold water and set down right then and there and washed all the blood offa me. Then I taken a fresh nightgown outa my top dresser drawer and put it on and I went to bed and to sleep.

That was the last good sleep I had in my life. I never had none

since then, I can tell you. First thing I heard next morning was mama moaning and groaning and saying oh my darling baby what has happened to you, and then it all come back to me, and yet I couldn't be sorry. I wouldn't a turned my hand to bring the two of them back to life.

Well, I got up and went to the breakfast table. Mama and papa musta got up early and eat and tiptoed around not wanting to wake Mr. Smith and Myrtle. I eat right hearty and mama kep on moaning and papa said he'd call for the police and he'd take the life of the fiends that done such a horrible thing. I remember I taken the last sip of coffee in my cup and I said papa, well I guess you won't have to look no farther for sure as you're born I killed Myrtle and Mr. Smith.

Mama looked at me like I was a unholy thing and papa just opened that toothless mouth of his and for oncet nothing come out.

I don't recollect much of what happened after that. They come and got me and locked me up and some newspapers sent folks to talk to me. One right nice lady come and I remember she talked to me mighty sweet, asting me how I felt and wondering if they was anything she could do for me. She talked on and on and finely she said well now, honey, you loved him yourself, didn't you, and you just couldn't bear to see your sister get him. I reckon that really was it I said.

And then next morning there was my pitcher on the front page and a story saying the murderess was jealous of her sister. That same lady bought me a nice dress for the trial and hired me a lawyer. I got right disgusted with it, couldn't stand to see my name in the paper or my pitcher and that story that was signed with my name and didn't have no more to do with me than if I was a jack rabbit.

I thought I was gonna smother at the trial in that black dress and with people shoving all around me and the smell of bananas and peanuts rising up and choking me. Come out in the paper people was lining up on the courthouse steps as early as four o'clock in the morning so they'd be sure to get a seat. Nobody in the world never paid me no attention before and here was the greatest hubbub in the world, men with their cameras and their light bulbs and lawyers shouting at one another ain't so 'tis so too, and me up there trying to talk and getting all balled up and starting to cry.

Still I didn't have no regrets about Myrtle and Mr. Smith but I was just hoping and hoping they'd hang me, anything to get me out of my misery.

Nights I'd wake up and hear the jailers talking, yes sir, they'd say, it's the cruelest, most cold-blooded thing ever happened. By God, she just sliced them up and made mincemeat out of both of them.

Well, finely the jury come out and the foreman was a little bald-

headed man and he said yes sir when the judge ast him if a verdik had been reached, he said that I had been judged inn-sane.

Next day the matron said we're sending you to the inn-sane asylum. I guess they'll teach you a thing or two down there.

So I went on down there to the asylum in a police car and I'll never forget the sight of driving in there and seeing all them people hanging outside them barred winders reaching out into the air and they was others walking up and down on the grounds like they wasn't thinking of nothing in particular and the funny way they blinked their eyes and the peculiar things they was doing running and chasing and yelling and giggling like children.

Night time was the worst when dreams would come to tarmint them and they'd screech and run and fight and you could hear the struggle some of the attindints was having with somebody they couldn't control.

With all that howling and yelling and nobody to say a word to I knowed I'd go crazy too. Oncet I went up to somebody that looked like she had right good sense and was smiling at me and I thanked God they was somebody around not a idiot and I said good morning to her and the things she said back at me I can't repeat.

I couldn't stand that place. I kep praying that I'd die.

But I stayed there eleven years right in the middle of all that and I was sure I was losing my mind. I'd try hard not to. In the morning I'd say to myself first thing when I got up, now Ruby you gotta do something to hold on to what little you know. Didn't allow us to use no pencils, nothing sharp we might hurt somebody with, but when time come for us to take a little outing I'd pick up a twig on the grounds and find a smooth place in the yard and I'd draw some figures and do a little adding and I'd say the multiplication tables up to seven, never learned no more, and I'd spell a few words.

Finely the years was gone and my hair was gray as a rat's and I jumped at the least noise and whimpered along with the others. Something happened then. They added what they called the new wing and some more doctors and nurses come in and they moved me to a new ward and they was one right nice doctor would call me every now and then to his office. Then finely one of the attindints come to me, didn't talk nice, said look here you ain't inn-sane, you can't clutter up this place no more.

Looks like not many of us can face our dreams coming true. Year after year that was my one thought, to get out of there, and right then I wanted to cling to it. Mama and pap hadn't paid me no attention, never had a word from them in all those years. I didn't have no home to go to. Wasn't a living soul cared whether I was dead or alive, and finely I broke down and begged them to let me stay, but they

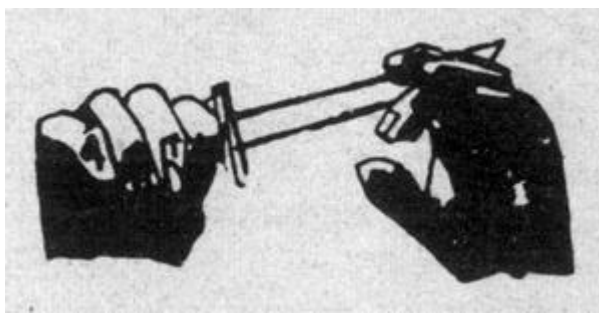
wouldn't.

So I come back up here and somehow that woman from the newspaper found out and come out and they taken a pitcher and right back in the paper I was. They printed a pitcher of me at the trial in that right pretty dress the woman had bought me, then they taken one of me in the asylum uniform, only thing I had to wear, and they entitled the pitcher the wages of sin, said I had paid, just look at the pitchers if you didn't believe it.

Wherever I turned people said that's her that killed her own blood sister and brother-in-law. I went everywheres trying to get honest work and nobody would do a thing for me. So I had to call on you all up at the relief office. I had to beg for charity. And all I have is what you all up there have give me.

And all I do all night between the catnaps which is all the sleep I get, and all I do in the daytime is think about that night I killed them and the way I useta love Mr. Smith before he taken up with Myrtle. I ast God to let my cold heart relent, but so far He hasn't seen fit to do it because I don't regret what I done. I just can't.

Nothing in this world is ever gonna make me regret what I done to Myrtle and Mr. Smith.



Detectiverse

Net Result
by Mark Grenier

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Said a mystery writer named Ted,
"I kept plodding away for my bread.
  I began as a hack,
  But I'm now in the black,
Because all of my herrings are read."

The Adventure of the Pie-Eyed Piper *by* Robert L. Fish

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A new Schlock Homes story by Robert L. Fish

In which we come upon Mr. Schlock Homes, the Great Detective, the Guzzler Puzzler, in a most deplorable condition, a condition we associate more often with some of the Great Private Eyes…

It was rare, indeed, for my friend, Mr. Schlock Homes, to indulge himself excessively in spirits; but the one time I recall when he might have been said to have had one over the eight, he still proved himself capable of resolving a situation that another might well have handled in an entirely different fashion, and almost certainly with completely different results.

I had come into the breakfast room of our quarters at 221-B Bagel Street one fine morning in June of the year ’79, to find Homes quite neatly fettered in a maze of rope. The chair to which he was bound had fallen to its side, carrying Homes with it, but still, in his indomitable manner, he was struggling to reach a book above him on the edge of the table.

“I should think that a most uncomfortable position in which to read, Homes,” I said, and then added, ever considerate, “However, I can see you are tied up. I can return for my repast at a later hour, if that should be more convenient.”

“No, no, Watney!” said he, a trifle impatiently. “It is simply that I suppose I should have read a bit further into Sir Baden-Powell’s book on scouting knots before I attempted to solve them. However, if you would kindly tug on this exposed portion of the cord—”

A moment later Homes was free and upon his feet, and after righting the chair and placing Sir Baden-Powell’s book in the dustbin, he seated himself across from me and reached for the parslied chutneys that Mrs. Essex had generously provided for our morning meal. As I drew my napkin into my lap, Homes began to eat while at the same time spreading the morning journal open upon the table and perusing the headlines. Suddenly he made a sound deep in his throat and looked up, considering me with a black frown upon his face.

“Tell me, Watney,” said he in dire tones, “what do you think of gifted children?”

I paused in reaching for a chutney to consider the question carefully, determined to be as analytical in my attention to the matter as Homes, himself, would have been. “Why,” I said at last, “it sounds rather onerous. Slavery has been abolished for some years now, and the giving of children, particularly as gifts, strikes me as being quite reprehensible, to say the least.”

“I should tend to agree,” said he, and continued to read further in the newspaper article that had claimed his attention. As I watched I could see the frown deepen upon his saturnine features. “Watney!” he exclaimed after a moment, looking up in horror, “this is infamous! Something must be done about it!”

“But what is it, Homes?” I cried.

“These gifted children,” he said darkly, “all of whom have in their time won medals for their musical ability, are being sent abroad! It says here ‘as a reward,’ but to whom they are being given, or what that person has done to deserve these talented children as a reward, the article does not say.”

He pushed his plate away, cast the journal to one side, and came to his feet heavily.

“We cannot stand idly by and see these poor children enslaved against their will!”

“But where are they being sent, Homes?” I inquired anxiously. “And why, if they must be enslaved, are not Englishmen at least given first occasion for their services?”

“Precisely my query!” he replied. “The children are being sent to Germany, to a small town there called Hamelin, on the banks of the Weser. But whoever arranged this fiendish mission has overlooked Schlock Homes!”

He began to undo the cord of his dressing-gown, but he had tied it in accordance with the strictures of Sir Baden-Powell and I was forced to come from my place and tug the end of the cord to free him.

“Thank you,” he said graciously. “Now, a moment for me to change to more suitable raiment, and we shall be off to scotch this nefarious scheme in the bud!”

“Scotch?” I said wonderingly, for in truth I had not been paying close attention. “And Bud? For a chaser? At this hour—?”

But Homes had already disappeared into his room, and I was left to reflect on the poor state of his memory, for he had not even attempted to pause at the sideboard on his way.

And so began the case which I find annotated in my daybook as *The Adventure of the Pie-Eyed Piper,* and most welcome it was. Homes had spent much of the previous fortnight at Loose Ends, the country estate of a banker friend of his, resolving the delicate matter of the

huge sums that had been embezzled from the Chase Madly Bank, a case I find delineated in my notes as *The Adventure of the Veiled Ledger,* and now that the affair had been brought to its aoristic conclusion, he was once again restless and searching for any matter that might occupy his ever-active mind. The situation in which he had discovered the poor children was to bring his ennui to an end, as well as to bring him, I was pleased to see, the consideration his results in the case so richly deserved.

Our Bradshaw indicated there was a steamer from Callooh to Calais which we were fortunate enough to book. Since Homes's beloved violin was out to have the frets tranquilized, and since my friend never travelled without a musical instrument of some sort to while away his unoccupied moments, he carried with him a penny-whistle, an instrument to which he had recently become introduced and which he played with considerable skill.

With it he was able to provide entertainment for our fellow passengers on the ship; nor were his efforts unappreciated, for we were regaled with coins presented, without doubt, by those in his audience familiar with the fact that Homes was an ardent numismatist. Thus occupied, my friend did not discuss the case at all during the voyage, nor did he deign to refer to it while we were on the Hamelin Express, preferring instead to softly play the Aria Coda from the Bell song on his whistle, as he undoubtedly planned his strategy.

We stepped from the train at the quaint station of Hamelin and were soon comfortably settled in at the Unterirdisch Heights Hotel, in connecting rooms. Travelling on the Continent has always been a challenge to me, since the pub hours of each country are so much at variance with our own, and I was about to knock up Homes and suggest we investigate Hamelin's particular schedule, when there was a rap on our connecting door and I opened it to find myself staring in astonishment at Homes in the most outlandish garments.

At sight of the figure he cut all other thoughts were banished from my mind, at least temporarily, for Homes had chosen to dress in the fashion of a schoolboy. I knew he had not brought along the accoutrements necessary for any of his spectacular disguises; but then I saw he had merely cut a pair of his trousers off at the knees, had rolled down his socks, and had clipped the brim of a derby and painted stripes on it to make a fair imitation of a schoolboy's cap. With his tremendous histrionic ability he undoubtedly felt sure he could easily pass off as a lad from a public school, albeit one who was six foot three inches in height with unusually hairy legs, in need of a facial shave, and with a penny-whistle tucked in one pocket.

"Homes!" I cried in bewilderment. "What is the meaning of this

absurd costume?"

"You recognised me?" he asked in evident disappointment. "Ah, well, I suppose it was only to be expected, after the years of training I have afforded you. The costume will not be so readily penetrated by the uninitiate, however, and it will enable me to merge without suspicion with the poor enslaved children. The whistle, of course, will also give me entree into their ranks, since they are all musicians. I shall be back as soon as possible."

"But Homes," I cried. "Supposing you are also enslaved, since you will appear so much like the others?"

"Then, of course, one can only hope for a reasonable master," he replied with a brave attempt at a schoolboy grin, and was off down the stairs.

While it was true that the public-house hours in Hamelin were, indeed, quite different from the outmoded practise still in force in our otherwise-enlightened Britain, the prices were also quite different, and I found myself returning to our rooms at the Unterirdisch Heights with six bottles of the local alcoholic endeavour, determined not to waste the currency of our beloved but admittedly financially distressed kingdom needlessly. I had sampled four of these liquid refreshments without determining if the savings were worthwhile, when Homes came up the stairs to my room and fell into a chair, staring at me morosely. I instantly offered him a drink which he downed in one draught, a clear indication that his mind was on other matters, or that he was thirsty. As I hurriedly refilled his glass, he sighed mightily.

"The condition of servitude of these children, Watney," said he heavily, "is far more subtle than one might imagine. Ostensibly they are being given a modicum of freedom, but obviously only to lull them into a false sense of security before being sent to their eventual masters."

"A modicum of freedom, Homes?" I inquired curiously.

He absent-mindedly drank off his drink and handed me the glass.

"Freedom of shorts," he said.

I stared at him in horror. "They have deprived the children of their underwear?" I asked, aghast.

"Freedom of sorts, I meant," said he, and took down his drink in one gulp, his mind on the problem of the children. He held out his glass. "Unforshunate for these mishcreans, they did not figure on the intervasion — intertasion—"

"The meddling of Schlock Homes?" I suggested helpfully.

"Profusely," he said. "I mean, precisely."

"But you do have a plan to aid these poor souls, Homes?" I asked anxiously.

“Of a certainly.” He leaned forward a bit, weaving slightly in his chair. “These chillruns, Watley, have formed theirselves into a orshester, and I have been electric loader.”

“I beg your pardon, Homes?” I said, puzzled.

“I said, I have been electered lader. I mean, leader.” He beamed at me proudly a moment, but then his face fell slightly. “Prollaly because I was the only one tall enough to be sheen from all parts of the orshester.”

“It’s still an honour, Homes,” I said soothingly. “But what has this to do with your plan to rescue the poor youngsters?”

“Ah! My plan!” He frowned a moment and then his frown disappeared as he remembered. “I shall need your help, Whitley, but I am sure I can deepen on that.”

“Of course, Homes!” I said warmly. “And your plan?”

“Ah, the plan! To-night, Whitney, I have arrange for the orshester to parade through the streets of — where are we?”

“Hamelin.”

“Hamelin, then. There is a broadridge that crosses the river Weser —”

“A what, Homes?”

“A broadridge!” Homes said impatiently, and glared at me for my stupidity. “A ridge that goes up and down to let the chips go through!”

“Oh! You mean a drawbridge!”

“Thass what I said! Anyway, you shall be in the control room of the broadridge. At precisely eight o’clock I shall lead the orshester over the ridge. At profusely eight-oh-two the lass man will have cross. At exactful eight-oh-three you will open the ridge so nobody can follow. Do you unnerstand?”

“But what of the regular operator?” I asked nervously. “Might he not take exception to my presence?”

“Play him with wicksy. I mean, ply him with whisky.” Homes pointed to a bottle. He came to his feet and then stumbled slightly. He stared at me in horror. “Witby! They are on to us!”

“What do you mean, Homes?” I cried in alarm.

“They have dragged my drunk!”

“You mean, they have drugged your drink?” I looked into his eyes, standing on tiptoe to do so. “You are right, Homes! Here, a hair of the dog and I am sure you will be fine in time for the rescue tonight!”

“Thank you,” Homes said gratefully, and then collapsed gently to the floor. “A shore nap before our work to-night...” And he relaxed to allow my cure to take effect.

It was seven in the evening when Homes awoke. The effects of the

drug our vile opponents had been clever enough to serve him without his knowledge were still slightly evident, for he grimaced with headache; nor did another drink seem to help. He glanced at his timepiece and came to his feet.

"It is time to leave, Watney," said he, feeling about for his penny-whistle.

It was with relief that he found it and played a few notes, nodding at the purity of their tone. "The night dampness," he explained, and led the way from the room.

The members of the orchestra were awaiting their leader on the village green, and came to their feet as Homes approached, lining up in marching formation. Homes glanced at his timepiece and nodded to me to get moving on my assignment, while he raised his penny-whistle to gain the attention of his musicians. As the first notes of his concert began, I hurried down the street to the bridge and made my way to the room where the controls for raising and lowering the structure were located. Following Homes's advice, I had brought with me a bottle of the strongest whisky I had purchased that afternoon. The bridge-tender frowned darkly when I made my appearance.

"Sir," he said, "visitors are not allowed."

"Not even when they bring drinks?" I asked coyly, holding out the bottle of whisky.

He raised his eyebrows. "Sir! I am the president of the Hamelin Temperance Society!" he said. "Whisky has never passed my lips, nor shall it! I must ask you to leave at once!"

I stood nonplussed, for the music of Homes and his orchestra was gaining in volume as they approached the bridge that could lead them to the other side of the river and to freedom, but only if I were successful in my mission.

"Not even a short one?" I asked pleadingly, and found myself on the street, with the imprint of the bridge-tender's foot undoubtedly necessitating a visit in the near future to my dry-cleaner's. I hurried down the street, coming to Homes as he marched at the head of his band. He frowned darkly to see me.

"The bridge-tender is a teetotaler," I explained quickly.

Homes wasted not a moment, but his mammoth intellect instantly understood and concocted an alternate scheme in a moment. He signalled a player in the front row of the marchers to take his place, and hurried me along on our way back to the bridge.

"I shall ask the bridge-tender for a match to light my calabash," he explained. "As he reaches into his pocket for a vesta, you will strike him unconscious. Do it posthaste, for time is running out!"

He swung open the door to the control room without awaiting my comments, and a moment later found himself facing an irate bridge-

tender. Homes smiled at the man in his most charming manner. “I wonder if I might bother you for a match to light my calabash,” he asked ingratiatingly.

The man scowled at him. “You are asking me to encourage the foul habit of smoking?” he demanded. “You, a schoolboy too young for such a vice?” He turned away in disdain. “D’you want to stunt your growth?”

“Hurry, Watney!” Homes exclaimed.

“But he didn’t give you a match yet!” I objected.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Homes said in disgust, and struck the man on the head with the blunt end of his penny-whistle. Even as the bridge-tender collapsed to the floor, Homes reached for the lever that opened the bridge. As the sounds of the creaking cables came to us, indicating the bridge was opening, Homes had me by the arm and was hurrying me from the room.

“And now we had best escape ourselves, while the time is ripe,” he said. “I investigated this bridge thoroughly in formulating my plan, and there is an old passage here which will lead us safely a distance from the bridge itself. But wait!” He paused and looked at me. “Did you hear something?”

“A splash and then someone saying ‘Glug,’ I thought,” I said. “Or possibly a whole number of people saying ‘Glug’.”

Homes looked at me almost pityingly.

“Your ignorance is monumental, Watney,” he said with scorn. “It is undoubtedly the bridge-tender saying ‘Gluck,’ meaning ‘luck’ in German. He is undoubtedly congratulating himself on not having been more seriously injured!”

And Homes led me out upon a path far from the bridge that would take us eventually to our hotel and thence to the railway station.

Having returned late at night from our journey to Hamelin, it was close upon noon when we came into the breakfast room the following morning and seated ourselves to a repast of Mrs. Essex’s curried oreganos. Feeling that possibly my contribution to the previous evening’s success had been minimal, I hastened to open the morning journal and search for some case that might keep Homes and myself occupied.

“Is there anything at all?” Homes inquired, looking at me queryingly across the table.

“Nothing new,” I said. “But there is a reference here to those lads we rescued last evening. It states and I quote: ‘The gifted young musicians that had gone to Hamelin are still missing.’ ”

Homes laughed in pure delight.

“Ah, youth! So pleased by their unexpected freedom that they are undoubtedly celebrating with a holiday in the country, without a thought to their worried parents! A letter of reassurance to the editor of the journal, if you would, Watney!”

The Decline and Fall of Norbert Tuffy *by* Ron Goulart

© 1981 by Ron Goulart

A new short story by Ron Goulart

Remember the Los Angeles ad man who used to breeze through these pages? Well, he's back in circulation, still the father confessor to some of the kookiest kooks in Tinsel Town. This time the dramatis personae include one of America's top models; a writer named Macho Sweeze; the ex-king of Zayt; a commercial artist who specializes in fruit; a Country-and-Western singer; and, of course, the Blind Butcher... a typical Hollywood cast, wouldn't you say?

Twenty-six million people saw them die, and that's not counting reruns.

Real murder is rare on television, particularly on a talk show. If you weren't one of those who caught the actual broadcast, you probably saw the pertinent footage on one of the evening network newscasts. The killer, who also appeared briefly on the talk show, eventually did a lot of explaining and so most everybody, including the police, thinks they know just about the entire story. Actually, the murderer himself barely knew half of what was going on.

I knew the victims and the killer, although I didn't realize until too late that they were going to be the victims and the killer. Since the authorities have the killer in custody, and since I hate to get myself tangled in public messes, there's no reason for me to volunteer the information I have as to the true causes of the effect all those millions of viewers witnessed. Sometimes when we're filming a commercial with Glorious MacKenzie and I notice her between takes, staring forlornly into her cup of Wake Up! Coffee, I'm tempted to tell her all I know. But I resist the temptation.

It was because of the lovely Glorious, one of America's top five models, that Norbert Tuffy concocted his whole caper. We'd been using the stunning redhaired Glorious in our Wake Up! Coffee television spots for nearly a year, ever since the Wake Up! lab back in Battle Creek had made their scientific breakthrough and we'd been able to use the very effective slogan, "Wake Up! The only coffee that's 100 % coffee free!"

Norbert and Glorious were living together in his mansion out on

the Pacific Palisades when I'd first met him at a cocktail party that my advertising agency gave for all our commercial talent. Norbert, who was very good in a scrap despite his size, helped me out when the actor who'd just been fired from our Grrrowl Dog Grub account tried to bite my ankle. I'd been expecting trouble from the moment I noticed the actor had crashed the party wearing his Grrrowl police-dog costume. At any rate, the small feisty Norbert and I became friends as a result of that incident.

It was several months later, over lunch at the Quick-Frozen Mandarin in Santa Monica, that he first alluded to the Blind Butcher affair. I was already in the booth when Norbert came scurrying in out of a hazy spring afternoon.

He was clad in one of those maroon running suits he was so fond of for daytime wear. "It was an omen." He plopped down opposite me and poured himself a cup of lukewarm tea.

"What?"

"When my house fell down the hill and into the sea last month."

"I thought the house only made it as far as the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway."

"The symbolism was there to be read by one and all. The decline and fall of Norbert Tuffy."

"Still haven't picked up a new scripting assignment?"

"I haven't had a TV script credit in four months. I am definitely on the proverbial skids."

"Maybe I can get you some freelance ad copy—"

"Ha," he said scornfully. "That would really finish me. It's bad enough my house fell into the Pacific because of a mud slide, it's bad enough my favorite Siamese cat was eaten by the pet wolfhound of a noted rock millionaire, it's bad enough Glorious is now living alone in a Westwood condo, it's bad enough I haven't won an Emmy in three years, it's bad enough I am virtually blacklisted because it's rumored I am suffering from writer's block, it's bad enough I'm being robbed of potential millions by a swine calling himself Macho Sweeze — and now you suggest I top it all by working in a cesspool such as that ad agency of yours."

"We pay as much as—"

"Forget it. I'd rather play piano in a bordello."

"You'd have to join the musicians' union to do that."

"Funny as a funeral is what you are," he observed as he snatched up the menu.

"Listen, you're letting a temporary setback cloud your whole—"

"Don't give me slogans. Do you realize Glorious and I may never get back together?"

"I wasn't even aware you two weren't living together. When we

shot the last Wake Up! commercial with her the other day, she seemed happy."

"Sure, dumping me makes her euphoric," he said, summoning the waiter in the silk kimono. "Bring me the Number Six lunch, and pronto."

"Being on the skids sure hasn't helped your disposition, Mr. Tuffy," remarked the waiter. "And you, sir?"

I ordered a Number Five. "You and Glorious have parted before, Norbert, and always—"

"Oh, I'll get that incredibly lovely bimbo back," he assured me. "I know exactly how and when. When I collect the $54,000."

"$54,000?"

"Happens to be the exact sum I need to pay off my debts and get back on my feet again."

"Then you are going to get the assignment to do the pilot script for *My Old Man's a Garbage Man?"*

"Naw, they double-crossed me out of that gig, too, even after I laid an absolutely socko treatment on 'em," Norbert said. "I intend to acquire the $54,000 in question from Macho Sweeze. It's one half of $108,000."

"It is, but why's Macho going to give it to you?"

"You know that scum?"

"We had some commercials for 150 %, the Headache Pill for a Headache and a Half on a movie of the week he wrote and I met him at the—"

"Wrote? That goon couldn't scrawl an X without help."

"I sense a bitterness in your tone."

Norbert fell silent until after our freshly thawed Chinese lunches has been placed before us. "Ever hear of a series of spy novels about a guy known as the Blind Butcher?" he asked me. "Allegedly penned by one Dan X. Spear. Published by Capstone Books."

"Vaguely." I poked my eggroll with my plastic fork and caused it to make a squeaking sound. "Why?"

"I created that series and wrote all six of the paperback novels."

"So you're Dan X. Spear?"

Norbert's teeth gnashed on his stir-fried tempeh. "Macho Sweeze is Dan X. Spear," he snarled. "See, this was all four, five years in the past, before I'd reached the dizzying pinnacle of success which I am presently toppling from. Macho had this vague nitwit idea for a series and he was going around with the granddaughter of Oscar Dragomann, the publisher of Capstone Books. A spindly broad of about seventeen summers, but Macho's always gone in for ladies with underdeveloped minds and bodies."

"What did you do, Norbert, sign some kind of agreement with

Macho that gave him all rights in the project?"

He snarled again. "Norbert Tuffy doesn't, not ever, do anything dumb," he told me, pointing his plastic fork. "I was, let us say, injudicious. Something I have been known to be in moments of extreme financial deprivation. Some people get woozy when you take away oxygen, I get careless when I'm suffering from lack of money."

"Where does the amount of $108,000 come from?"

"The series was less than a hit," explained Norbert. "In fact, the final book in our series, *The Spy Who Broke His Leg,* never even got out of Dragomann's central warehouse down in Whittier." He paused to gobble a few bites of food. "We now dissolve from back then to now. Macho, lord knows how, is presently a dazzling star in the Hollywood writing firmament. Furthermore, he has become, possibly because of their mutual interest in young ladies who've only recently shed their braces, a close chum of ex-king Maktab Al-barid."

"Him I've never heard of," I admitted.

"Another reason I wouldn't let anybody chain me to an advertising agency — turns your brains to jelly. Anyway, Maktab Al-barid ruled the Arab country of Zayt until some fanatic holy roller led a revolt and took over that oil-rich little spot," said Norbert. "Before Maktab Al-barid skipped the country he managed to stash away something like a couple of billion bucks in various banks around the world. At the moment he resides in ex-kingly splendor in a Bel Air mansion once owned by a silent-screen lover and more recently by those rock poets of the platinum records, Honey and Hank."

"This Arab king is financing Macho in something?"

"The peabrain is going to make movies," replied Norbert. "His first motion-picture venture, announced but a few days ago in the Hollywood trades, is to be — we'll skip the trumpet fanfare — an adaptation of *The Spy Who Went Through the Meatgrinder."*

"One of the Blind Butcher novels?"

"One of *my* Blind Butcher novels, yeah. Second one in the series." The plastic fork suddenly snapped in his clenched fist. "See, under that dumb little agreement I injudiciously signed with him back then, Macho retains *all* subsidiary rights. All I ever saw was half of the paltry initial advances. Maktab Al-barid has paid Macho $108,000 for the screen rights and he's going to hand over an additional $216,000 for a screenplay."

"He seems to favor multiples of 54."

"That's the kind of sympathy I need."

I shrugged. "Norbert, you made a mistake," I said. "Maybe with a good lawyer you can do something."

"Good lawyer? There is no such being," he said. "No, to get my share — and Macho can keep the screenplay money — to get my

share of that $108,0001 intend to start applying pressure. I may even drop in on Maktab Al-barid himself, although I hear he keeps himself very well bodyguarded because of a fear, perfectly legit, that terrorists from Zayt may be dropping in. Seems they'd like to have Maktab Al-barid star in a trial for treason and sundry other misdemeanors."

"I still think an attorney could—"

"I already talked to three of them."

"What did they say?"

"I haven't got a chance to collect."

As it turned out I phoned Norbert less than a week later. Locating him was a little difficult, since his answering service had just dropped him for being three months in arrears on his bill. His agent swore he'd never heard of him, then offered me five other writers who were currently hot properties. Finally I got Glorious to admit she was still in contact with him and that he, having just checked out of the Beverly Glen Hotel in another economy move, was residing in the back half of an old duplex down in Manhattan Beach.

"Hello?" he answered that afternoon, using a completely unbelievable British accent. "You are speaking to Mr. Norbert Tuffy's confidential secretary, what ho."

"Hey, Norbert, listen," I said, and identified myself.

"Old chap, you're making a bally mistake. Mr. Tuffy—"

"The agency doesn't like me to waste too much time on personal calls," I went on. "But there's something I better talk to you about."

"Not a penny less than $54,000, if you're acting as go-between for your buddy."

"Macho Sweeze? Haven't even seen him since you and I had lunch last week." From my office window I could watch a handsome high-rise building being constructed, its topmost floors lost in pale smog. "This has to do with a guy named Fritz Momand."

"What a sappo name. Who is he?"

"Don't you know?"

"I have no recollection of the name."

"Fritz Momand is a freelance commercial artist who specializes in fruit. I happened to—"

"In what?"

"Fruit. He's doing a series of ads for us for FrootBoms Cereal. That's the stuff shaped like little hand grenades which explode with flavor when you pour milk over—"

"What has this Fritz guy to do with me?"

"I was at his studio over on La Cienega yesterday, to okay his painting of an orange, and he got to talking about his wife. Her name is Frilly Jonah." I paused, anticipating a response.

“Anybody who’d voluntarily call herself that must have show-business aspirations.”

“She does. She’s a Country-and-Western singer who hasn’t had much success.”

“Probably sings on key, which is a great handicap,” said Norbert. “You’re not the greatest yarn spinner on the face of Los Angeles, pal. Not that I don’t enjoy chitchat and pointless blab—”

“You don’t know Frilly? You haven’t been seeing her on the sly?”

“Eh? Norbert Tuffy does nothing, absolutely *nada,* on the sly,” he said loudly. “Besides which, my heart is still in a sling over Glorious MacKenzie.”

“This is the truth?”

“Do I ever lie? Don’t try to tell me this fruit vendor claims Norbert Tuffy has been fooling around with Frilly while he’s been slaving over a hot persimmon?”

I cleared my throat and turned away from the view, which was making my eyes water. “Fritz Momand is a big, violent guy who likes hunting,” I began. “Very tough, extremely jealous. He’s grown suspicious of late that Frilly has been seeing someone else. In the course of ransacking her room while she was off singing at the Back in the Saddle Club in Ventura, he unearthed a complete set of the Blind Butcher paperback novels. Each one was inscribed to his wife in glowing phrases. One such said: *To the apple-cheeked, delight who’s brought a new kind of love to me, with the passionate regards of the author.”*

“You actually thought Norbert Tuffy could write gush like that?” he asked. “Using a fruit image to woo the guy’s wife is a nice touch, though. How old is this Frilly?”

“Never actually met her, but she’s quite a bit younger than her husband. Probably about nineteen or twenty.”

“So use your coco, chum. It’s obviously that scoundrel Macho Sweeze who’s putting the Dan X. Spear pen name to yet another sleazy use and giving the horns to your pushcart Picasso.”

“But you wrote the books.”

“True, true,” said Norbert, “except, as I made perfectly clear to you when last we met, Macho loves to claim the credit. I am sure it’s he who’s using the books to impress this honkytonk bimbo now that one book is a movie-to-be.”

“You’re probably right. Just wanted to warn you to watch out for Fritz Momand, since he seems the kind of guy who likes to do violence to those who fiddle with his wife,” I said. “You haven’t had any luck getting a settlement out of Macho, huh?”

“The amount of luck I’ve had in any area of late, pal, you could insert in a flea’s nostril and still have room left to pack in an agent’s

heart," he answered. "I approached Macho and, politely for me, suggested he ought to do right by me. He was cordial, for him, and swore he'd see to it I got a little something. That is, *after* the film is released, which will be a good two years hence."

"You don't believe he'll do even that?"

"Most of Macho Sweeze's sincere promises could go on that list of the world's most famous lies, the one that commences with 'The check's in the mail.' "

"So now?"

"Since you are sincerely interested in my fate, unlike the circle of Judases I used to run with, I'll tell you what Norbert Tuffy has in mind. I have always been hailed, and justly so, as one of the most brilliant plotters in this nutty town. Even now, in my temporary exile, I have not lost the knack."

"You have a new movie idea in the works?"

"Naw, I'm working out a foolproof way to get the money Macho owes me."

The very next day I was stuck back on the SoyHammy account. That's about the only account in the shop, as you may recall, that I don't really enjoy. But this was a full-scale emergency and I had to fly to Chicago the same afternoon. It seems the head of SoyHammy's own advertising department had just been killed in a freak accident. He'd been having a drink at one of those revolving bars in a penthouse night club when the darn thing started to revolve three or four times faster than it was supposed to. When it suddenly stopped, he was flung clean off the terrace and fell to the street thirteen stories below.

His employers at SoyHammy had come up with the idea of giving his remains a lavish funeral, and since he had been associated with SoyHammy for many years, they figured it would be a nice touch to have all six pallbearers in pigsuits like the one the announcer wore on our SoyHammy commercials. To halt that before anybody in the media got wind of it, I was speeded eastward.

Talking all concerned out of the pigsuits and then sitting in while they interviewed candidates to fill the deceased's job consumed over two weeks. That spell in Chicago coincided exactly with Norbert's execution of his plan to get what he felt was owed to him.

Since I only spoke to Norbert once, very briefly on the phone, most of the details of his caper are what I got from the newspapers and television. Not that any of them knew who was really behind the scheme. He really was a good planner and the whole deal went smoothly.

What Norbert did was to kidnap Macho Sweeze. He then convinced Maktab Al-barid that the snatch was the work of Zaytian

terrorists from his homeland and that unless the ex-king came up with $55,000 in cash for the Zayt Liberation Fund, he'd start receiving packages containing various choice cuts of his favorite author. That extra $1000, by the way, was to cover the expenses of the snatch itself. Norbert wore built-up shoes, a padded coat, and a stocking mask when he grabbed Macho, and even his rival author didn't recognize him.

"He was a tall skinny guy, must've been an Englishman from the way he talked," Macho told the police and the F.B.I. later.

Norbert gave Macho a shot of horse tranquilizer, something he'd swiped from the location of a Western film, and that kept him out cold for most of the twenty-seven hours that Norbert held on to him. In a way I contributed — unwittingly, to be sure — to Norbert's final plan. He took Macho out of the parking lot behind that Country-and-Western club in Ventura where Frilly Jonah appeared now and then.

Maktab Al-barid was warned not to go to the law or Macho would be treated exactly as the Blind Butcher treated gangsters and subversives in the novels. To the ex-king, of course, $55,000 was nothing at all and he was even a bit puzzled as to why the fanatics asked for so little. It was a small price to pay for the safe return of one of his dear friends, and he paid it readily.

Once Macho was returned, his agent gave out the story. It was terrific publicity for the upcoming movie. There had already been a few small mentions in the trade papers about the movie, some of which had even mentioned that Macho Sweeze was Dan X. Spear. Now, however, the whole country was talking about the Blind Butcher and his brilliant creator, about how life had imitated art, and what a narrow escape he'd had. You could never really trust terrorists — they might well have taken the $55,000 and butchered Macho anyway.

The kidnaping made a celebrity of Macho. He began to show up on local talk shows, to get his picture in the magazines and the papers. The last time I ever spoke to Norbert was the afternoon the issue of *Persons* hit the area newsstands, with Macho's dark, roughly handsome face beaming from the cover.

"Did you see it?" Norbert asked.

I was fresh back from Chicago, suffering jet lag and what I suspect was a serious allergic reaction to nearly two solid weeks of Soy-Hammy for breakfast. My head was throbbing, my eyes were watering, and I didn't really respond very sympathetically.

"See what?"

"That smug leering face on the cover of *Persons*. Gosh, it's disgusting. When writers of real talent can't even get their pictures on a roll of—"

"Macho's had a lot of publicity lately," I reminded him, careful of

what I said over the phone. Sometimes they listened at the switchboard. “Thanks, I imagine, to you — that was your touch I noted, wasn’t it?”

“Who else?” I could almost hear his broad satisfied grin. “You going to inform on me?”

“None of my affair.” I surveyed the pile of stuff that had gathered on my desk top in my absence; there was even a 9-pound SoyHammy. “Norbert, I have a lot of—”

“I’m back with Glorious,” he told me.

“Good. I guess. Where are you living?”

“New place in Malibu. Very classy. Used to belong to Honey and Hank.”

“So things are pretty much going okay for you again?”

“I have some bucks for the nonce, yeah. But I am not being bothered by the sound of eager producers pounding at my door to demand scripts. The only nibble I’ve had is from some guy who claims he’s bought the rights to revive *Death Valley Days* on the tube,” said Norbert, the momentary joy fading from his voice. “Boy, if I could’ve gotten all that publicity that Macho grabbed. After all, I wrote the books. Not him.”

“Macho’s new fame is a side effect of — well, of what happened to him,” I said. “Look on the bright side. You and Glorious are back togeth—”

“That’ll last about six minutes longer than my supply of loot.”

“Still you ought to—”

“He’s going to appear on the Mack Nay dell Show tomorrow morning, live from FishWorld in Laguna.”

“That’s one of the fastest rising talk shows in the country.” I pressed my temple to try and control the throb. “But now, Norbert, I ought—”

“You bet it’s a hot show. Naydell’s going to knock Douglas, Carson, Donahue, Davidson, and Arends right out of the box any day now.” Enthusiasm had returned to his voice. “They’ve been running teaser spots all day about Macho’s appearance manana.”

“Don’t watch, it’ll only—”

“Remember that the Mack Naydell show is done absolutely *live,”* he said. “Meaning they can’t edit it for most of their markets. I prevailed on one of my few remaining chums in Hollywood and got a ducat for the broadcast.”

“You’ll only upset yourself.”

“Ah, tune in and see,” chuckled Norbert.

Macho Sweeze appeared as scheduled the next morning. The show was broadcast live from the big outdoor amphitheater at

FishWorld. The day was clear, smogless, bright blue. There were some five hundred people circling the open-air stage where the prematurely gray Mark Naydell chatted with his famous guests. A very handsome setting the show had — the tree-filled hills around the outdoor theater framed it nicely.

Up in the forest, stretched out among the tall trees, was Fritz Momand. He had one of his high-powered hunting rifles with him, equipped with a telescopic sight. He also had a small battery-operated TV set, the earphone to his ear. Anything said down there on the stage he'd hear.

Frilly, early that morning, admitted she had indeed been having an affair with the man who had written the Blind Butcher novels. Fritz knocked her cold before she got to give him many more details. He left her sprawled, still in one of her fringe-trimmed cowgirl suits, on the living-room floor and took off for Laguna with his favorite rifle. He was a violent man who believed there was only one just punishment for a man who took advantage of his wife.

I watched the show from one of the screening rooms at the agency. My secretary was with me so I could dictate letters while I watched.

"Oh," she exclaimed just before a commercial break, "isn't that your friend there, in the second row of the audience?"

"Who?"

She pointed to the screen. "The belligerent little fellow who drops in for lunch sometimes."

By the time I looked up from my pile of papers they were showing a SoyHammy commercial. "You mean Norbert Tuffy?"

"I think that's his name. He won an Emmy or something years ago. What's he doing these days?"

"Sort of difficult to explain."

After the block of commercials we got a grinning closeup of Mack Naydell. "This next guest's long been one of my favorite people and a damn fine writer. I'm kicking myself it took a near-tragedy to remind me to have him drop in to visit us," he said. "Let's welcome a very talented guy, Macho Sweeze."

They cut to a medium shot to show Macho come striding out to shake hands and sit in an armchair next to the affable host.

"Happy to be here, Mack," Macho said.

"He's got a sexy voice," said my secretary.

"Before we talk about your recent experiences," said Naydell, leaning in the direction of his guest, "I'd like to talk about the Blind Butcher books."

Up in the woods above the theater Fritz Momand made the final adjustments to his rifle. He had Macho in the crosshairs now and was

waiting for just the right second to fire. He figured he'd have time for two, maybe three shots. As he waited he listened to them talking.

"Up until recently," Naydell was saying, "no one knew you'd written these great suspense novels, Macho. One of which will soon be a major movie. But now you've come out from behind the Dan X. Spear pen name."

"Yeah, I got tired of hiding my light under a bushel," said Macho, grinning. "Now I am openly admitting that I am the author of the Blind Butcher series."

Fritz's finger tightened on the trigger.

Then up out of the audience leaped Norbert Tuffy. Before anyone could restrain him, he hopped right on the stage and ripped the lapel mike off Macho's checkered jacket.

"That's a lie!" Norbert shouted, and turned, arm raised high and facing the audience. "My name is Norbert Tuffy and I'm the true and only author of the Blind Butcher books!"

Fritz hesitated. He wasn't sure which one, Macho or Norbert, had written the books and had an affair with his wife.

He decided to play it safe.

He shot both of them.

Concerto for Violence and Orchestra *by* William Bankier

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A new short story by William Bankier

There have been classic cases in which a whole landscape has been stolen, in which a house and all its furnishings have disappeared, in which an entire jury and a complete baseball team have been abducted. Now read about the theft of a five-piece dance band...

People will steal anything. The police could open their files and show you cases of a ship being stolen, or lead from a church roof, or a herd of cattle. Countries even try to steal other countries — we read about it in the papers every day. These thoughts cross my mind as I remember what happened between me and Carlotta Teddington and Leonard Zolf. Perhaps I should begin in the traditional way.

Once upon a time there was a man who tried to steal a dance band.

The band in question is The Bones Cornfield Quintet and I am the leader. The nickname suits me. I weigh 190 pounds but it is spread thin over a six-foot four-inch frame. A sadistic guitar player once told me that when I am asleep it is easy to imagine what I will look like when I've been dead a few years.

The quintet is a semi-pro band. We play once a week at a pub in southwest London. The money is minimal but the management is enlightened. He charges no admission, so we always have a full house of beer drinkers who like the forties swing we play.

Some of us have regular jobs. Carlotta, our vocalist, teaches school in Wandsworth. Muir Levy, our piano player, sells cut-price Asian holidays to homesick Pakistanis. That may be the beginning of a lyric. Clay Braithwaite, our reed player, drives a Number 93 bus for London Transport. Pat Manta, the drummer, paints houses occasionally and collects social security regularly. And I play double bass when I'm not pulling pints on the morning shift at the Rose and Crown.

Quintet, you say, counting on your fingers. Quintet?

I'm coming to the fifth member of the band (sorry girls, we don't count the female vocalist). He is the man I mentioned earlier, Leonard Zolf, trumpeter. Leonard used to be with the National Westminster

amateur jazz band till the bank fired him. Now he sells used cars. When we ask why the bank gave him the sack, Zolf inflates like a pigeon, tugs at the points of his red waistcoat, smooths his pale thinning hair with both hands, and changes the subject.

It was shortly after Zolf joined the band that the trouble started. We had finished our Tuesday night rehearsal in the back room at St. Stephen's Church hall. The vicar lets us use the room free because the band plays for nothing at his annual summer fête. I was inviting Carlotta to join me for coffee when we heard Zolf s voice rising in that locust drone of his.

"Terrible to be playing this out-of-date music when we could be making money." He was not talking to anybody in particular. Zolf has a way of soliloquizing, scattering words like a fisherman flinging bait on the water, confident that sooner or later something will surface. "We should be playing disco. That's where the money is."

"The bank is where the money is," Braithwaite said. Braithwaite is from the West Indies. When he plays soprano sax, he sounds like Sidney Bechet. "You never told us why you left the bank."

Zolf ignored the probe. "I know the man who books the Aladdin Disco. We could get in there twice a week on a standard contract."

Nobody said anything. Muir Levy played a progression of Shearing-esque chords. His eyes were on me. So were those of the other sidemen. Their heads were raised, their movements frozen, like antelopes around the waterhole checking out their leader to see if it was time to run.

I followed rules one and two of my emergency procedure used whenever I am threatened by events. I said nothing and I did nothing. Later, as Carlotta was helping me load my double bass into the back of the minivan, she said, "Zolf is deliberately making waves."

"I felt them lapping around my ankles."

"How long are you going to wait? Till your nostrils get wet?"

"It's only talk."

"That's how palace revolutions begin. Talk. He's trying to steal your band."

She got behind the wheel and I sat in calmly beside her, a good man, a harmless man, everybody likes me. "Never trust a musician who wears rimless glasses," Carlotta warned.

Our weekly Thursday night gig at the pub was a great success. We went through our modified arrangements of big-band standards and the crowd ate it up. Carlotta was in good voice. She sings like June Christie used to do with Stan Kenton, in a pure, clear, almost child-like voice. But whereas Christie was a blonde beauty, Carlotta Teddington's appearance suggests gypsy ancestors. Her long black hair falls over one shoulder in a braid thick enough to moor one end of the

QE2. Her broad face maintains a tan even under the random English sun and those pale green eyes announce that no phonies need apply.

When we stopped playing at 10:30 and the crowd dispersed in deference to English drink-licensing laws, the manager, a shaggy man named Shep, shuffled over to the bandstand. “Good news and bad news,” he said. “Which do you want first?”

“No news,” Manta the drummer said.

“Means good news,” Shep concluded. “Okay, the good news is I can’t afford to pay you any more.”

“Thank goodness the money is so bad we won’t miss it,” Braithwaite said.

“I can always paint a house,” Manta said.

I joined in the mood of levity. “I can always move back to Nottingham and resume my job dragging the rain covers on and off the cricket field. At least it’s steady work.”

Muir Levy played a heavy fanfare on the piano. “And now for the bad news.”

“The bad news,” Shep said, “is that I want you to keep on playing for me. You’re sounding better all the time. *the A Train* was really super tonight.”

“I think we’ve just been told we’re loved,” I said.

“Is that what you call it?” Zolf muttered. “I call it rape.”

Before we left, I reassured the pub owner that we would continue showing up on Thursday nights. The following week, on Monday at half-past seven, I took a bus to Carlotta’s school. She gives a bunch of the older girls a class in voice production after which I collect her and we go for a tandoori chicken dinner at the Bombay Paradise Take-Away Café. Yes, that could become another lyric.

I was early but the girls were leaving and there was no sign of Carlotta. “She had to go,” one of them told me. “Something about a special band meeting at the church hall.”

I sprang for a taxi, spending my now-redundant tandoori money. At the church hall there was no music being played. It was more like a conference at the bank. Carlotta interpreted the expression on my face. It told her there had been activity from the Zolf department of treachery, Doublecross Division. “I thought you knew about this,” she whispered. “I expected you to be here.”

“And here I am,” I said, giving Zolf one of my nice-guy smiles. Everybody likes me, that’s why I’m the leader.

“This is about the disco gig,” Zolf said in my direction. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

“Rimless glasses,” Carlotta murmured.

“I’m interested in whatever affects The Bone’s Cornfield Quintet,” I said. “Carry on.”

It seemed Zolf had been negotiating with the manager of the Aladdin Disco. When Shep announced he could no longer pay us, the former bank employee rubbed the magic lamp. The result was an offer for us to play not one but two nights a week at the Aladdin for a fee which, if not exactly handsome, was certainly not as homely as the amount we had been getting from Shep.

At the end of Zolf's explanation the band members turned and looked at me. "What do you say, boss?" Braithwaite asked.

"I don't like discos," I said. "I hate disco music. In my opinion it is to popular music what sausages are to food. I would hate to see The Bones Cornfield Quintet playing in a disco."

"That's another thing," Zolf said. "I don't think that's a persuasive name for a disco band. We should call ourselves something like Zodiac or Starsounds."

This opened the door to a fifteen-minute creative session as everybody suggested names for a disco band. It proved my point about the sterile disco scene: say any word that comes into your head and it can be the name of one of their pseudo-bands. Paperclip. Blinding Headache. Desk Lamp. It's the same with race horses. You can call a race horse anything and you can call a disco band anything.

I began to realize the other four were ready to try this enterprise. The money appealed to them. So did two nights a week. The Bones Cornfield Quintet was not as holy an institution to them as it was to me, Bones Cornfield.

"There's something else," I argued. "The Aladdin has a bad reputation. The kids pour out into the street when the dance is over and they have gang fights. Punks against mods. They vandalize the bus shelters, intimidate people walking their dogs. It's a bad scene."

"I don't see what that has to do with the band," Zolf said, dismissing me as if I was a teenager asking for a loan. "How many of you want to give it a try?"

Diabolical sonofagun, how could anybody object to giving something a try? Up went the hands of Manta, Levy, and Braithwaite. Carlotta and I felt the ship going down beneath us.

"As for your old-style double bass," Zolf said to me, "I'd rather have an electric bass for this gig. I know a guy. And no hard feelings, Carlotta," he said, filling the room with feelings as hard as anthracite, "but we don't need a vocalist for the music we'll be playing."

No question about it, the band was being stolen from under my nose.

I wanted to yell, "Arrest that man!" Instead I said, "Don't count me out, Len. I can borrow a Fender bass from a friend of mine. And I'll know the fingering by the time we play."

"And I'll shake a tambourine and look sexy on stage," Carlotta

said. “This is my band, too.”

One rehearsal was all the quintet needed to master the tedious music played to accompany the gymnastics of the disco crowd. After an evening’s work the group was ready with a program to be performed in half-hour chunks alternating with recorded music supervised by a DJ with a professional vocabulary of 35 words.

I brought a few tins of beer to Carlotta’s flat the night before the first gig and we conducted a pre-mortem, sitting in deck chairs on her back roof, watching strips of lighted train windows flowing past on the overhead tracks a mile away, listening to a tape of my old favorites that included the Dinning Sisters singing *Me.*

“I found out why Zolf was kicked out of the bank,” Carlotta told me.

“How did you do that?”

“A friend of mine works at the Wandsworth branch. She’d never heard of Leonard Zolf but she asked some questions.”

“What were the answers?”

“He took it upon himself. The loans manager was away for a week and during that time Zolf granted loans and overdrafts to several people who should not have had them. He did it because it made him feel important.”

“That’s our Zolf.”

“He takes it upon himself,” Carlotta repeated as she opened two more beers and passed one to me.

“Whatever happened to our nice band?” I asked more or less rhetorically. “And how is it all going to end?”

“Nothing stays the same,” was Carlotta’s defeatist reply.

“I’ll tell you something that stays the same,” I said, listening to the pure voices on the tape blending like silver chimes. “Sweet harmony stays the same. Good sounds.”

Carlotta picked me up and drove me to the Aladdin. As we went inside, I saw the band’s new name on a sign near the door. Zolf the banker had been at work — the group was now called Overdraft.

The experience was as boring and as threatening as I knew it would be. We played our first set all in one chunk, not even bothering to change keys. Zolf repeated a monotonous riff on the trumpet, stepping to the microphone every now and then to cry, “Get down!” and sometimes he blew a blast on a referee’s whistle. What it had to do with music was beyond me.

The kids lurked in groups and might have been in communication except when they danced. Then it was zombie time. I suppose they were all imagining themselves to be John Revolting or Trivia Neutron-Bomb. I remembered the old days when a dance meant arms around

each other and heads together, sweet kisses and whispered promises.

When closing time rolled around, the kids were turned out into the street, and we soon heard the sounds of combat. We went to the doorway. There were a dozen lads fighting and a hundred watching, screaming them on. I saw boys on the ground covering up, the boot going in, lots of spit and cursing. One thing struck me — not much physical damage was being done. It was like a ritual; they did it because it was expected of them. We used to have the Home Waltz and today they have a punch-up.

A bus went by and wisely refused to stop. Some boys and girls ran after it flinging bottles which smashed in the street. “Is this what we’re doing two nights a week from now on?” I said to nobody in particular.

Zolf picked it up. “Nothing to do with us.” He had a fistful of money. “Come on inside,” he announced. “It’s payday.”

That was the Tuesday fiasco. We had another scheduled for Friday. On Thursday, Carlotta came to my place and I put on the album of Charlie Parker with Strings. Eventually we would wander down the road for fish and chips. For now we were talking and sipping rose and getting hungry.

“I don’t think I can face the Aladdin any more,” I said.

“Nobody really likes it except Leonard.”

“Then why are we doing it?”

“Because it’s been sold to us.”

“Same reason the kids go, I suppose. They’ve been told this is the thing to do.”

“And a lot of hustlers in the record business are making a fortune merchandising schlock.”

“Well, I’m not buying any more. Let Zolf get his friend to play bass.”

Carlotta punished me with half a minute of disapproving silence. Then she said, “Do you know all that is needed for the triumph of evil?”

I completed the axiom. “That good men do nothing.”

“Right. This is your band, Bones. We’re going through a bad patch, you can’t desert us now. Stay and fight.”

The thought of confronting Zolf, of taking him on for control of the band, was very upsetting. Zolf loved contention, the threat of violence fueled his engine. I wanted peace at any price, almost. Even now I felt the tension, a frightening anger boiling up inside me.

Then the stylus slid into the next track on the record and Charlie Parker began to blow *April in Paris*. As the string section laid down a fabric of lush chords, Bird’s alto poured out notes like hard, bright diamonds tumbling from a velvet sack. I felt my tension evaporating.

"Carlotta," I said, "I think I have an idea." I told her what I had in mind.

"That's more like it," she said, and she gave me an approving kiss.

"That's more like it," I said.

The Friday disco was a photocopy of the one before. I suspected they would all be the same until the kids died of boredom at seventeen. During one of our breaks, while the DJ was plugging the top ten and Zolf was in the manager's office counting the take, I had a word with the other members of the group. They needed no long explanation — they were with me immediately.

The only problem would be getting rid of Zolf at the crucial time. Carlotta said she would take care of it.

As we began our final set, she went to Zolf and said, "I was just out in the parking lot having a breath of air. Your car is gone."

Zolf put down his trumpet and left on the run. "Is his car really gone?" I asked.

"Sure is," Carlotta said. "I sneaked the keys from his coat and moved it during intermission. It's on the next street. He'll be a good half hour talking to the police."

The band played two more identical numbers and then I stopped the sausage machine. I went to the mike and said, "Okay, kids, a change in mood. We're going to close with something different. We call this a time to get to know your partner."

I counted a slow four and the band began to play one of our romantic medleys. We started with *Sentimental Journey,* segued into *Harlem Nocturn,* then ended with *Dream.* Carlotta sang the final number in that clear voice of hers, no pretense, just an intelligent concentration on the meaning of the words.

"*...Things never are as bad as they seem...*"

The crowd applauded when the set ended, the first human response I have ever heard from a disco floor. As they drifted out of the hall, Zolf appeared with a livid face. "All right," he said, "which one of you cretins moved my car?"

"Guilty, and proud of it," Carlotta said.

"Acting on my instructions," I put in. "We needed you gone so we could change the program."

"Yes, I heard that Mickey Mouse music from the outside. What's going on?"

"Follow me and I'll show you."

I led the group to the front door and we stepped outside into a calm summer evening. The kids were drifting away, some of them queueing for a bus. There was a certain amount of exuberant teenaged

shouting, but not a clenched fist anywhere.

"What we did was soothe a lot of savage breasts and ennoble a few hearts," I said. "We charmed these kids with our music."

"That isn't the idea," Zolf fumed. "Disco music turns people on, it strings them out. Man, we are paid to establish a 'high' and sustain it. No way are you going to change this lucrative gig into your square old failure of a band concert. That was the first and last time you alter my program."

Zolf turned and headed inside. I glanced at Carlotta; she was watching me. So were the other members of the quintet. Carlotta nodded but said nothing. Words were unnecessary. I knew this was a perfect example of the bad guy winning unless the good guy is willing to take action. "Hey, Zolf," I called, stopping him at the door.

"Yeah?"

"I take exception to everything you just said."

"So?"

I approached him, took the rimless glasses off his nose, and handed them to Carlotta. "So this," I said and planted one on his jaw. He sat down on the pavement and looked up at me. "The band now goes back to being The Bones Cornfield Quintet," I said. "We'll keep the disco job. But we'll play a balanced program, the frenetic stuff interspersed with standards that don't all sound the same. All right?"

I'm not sure whether Zolf replied because the response from the boys was immediate and loud. "Yeah! That's right, boss. That's what we're going to do."

Driving home with Carlotta, I said, "That felt good. It really did. One punch on the chops gave me more satisfaction than saying all the right things in a ten-minute argument."

"That's why they invented violence," she said. "It's like making love. It feels good." The car rolled to a stop in front of her house. "And you were terrific," she added, putting her arms around me. "I like the way you took charge." She kissed me so hard my teeth hurt.

"Which was that?" I asked. "Love or violence?"

"Take your choice," she said. "It's a fine line."

And I think that's a fine line to end on.

M as in Mayhem
by Lawrence Treat

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A new Mitch Taylor story by Lawrence Treat

A brisk, breezy procedural about one of our favorite cop characters, Mitch Taylor of Homicide, assigned to protect a frightened concert pianist... "A lot of times you don't really figure things out, you just go ahead and do something, and then later on it adds up and you find out why you did if"...

The way Mitch Taylor, Homicide, got it, it seemed that this Vladimir Borsky was supposed to give a concert tomorrow night and he'd asked for police protection on account his wife had threatened to chop off his hands or something. When the lieutenant handed out the assignment to Mitch, he figured about all he had to do was go out to the new Hubert Humphrey airport, pick the guy up, and then deliver him to his hotel and again to the concert hall the next day. After that somebody else could worry.

With a name like Borsky the guy ought to be easy to spot, even if he didn't carry his piano around with him. Only he wasn't, because when he showed up at the information counter after he got paged, he looked like he was ready to get down and hide under a piano instead of sitting in front of it. He was kind of a tall skinny guy with a nose that kept sniffing around, like he was going to sneeze only he couldn't get started, and he looked pooped.

After Mitch introduced himself and showed his identification, he asked Borsky about this wife of his and what she had against him.

"Dough," Borsky said. "She wants the shirt off my back and just about everything else I got."

"What does she look like?" Mitch asked.

Borsky let loose like he'd been saving up his answer and here was his big chance.

"Mary O'Shaughnessy," he said, "has a build like Marilyn M., she's got a temper like a Hottentot, and she packs a wallop like Ali. Only she does it with a hammer."

Mitch gagged on that one. "Mary O'Shaughnessy? Who's she?"

"My wife," Borsky said. "I'm Bill O'Shaughnessy. In this racket you gotta have a name that can pull them in. Borsky. Short and sweet.

People remember it."

Mitch didn't exactly follow. Still, this guy made a living out of it and he had a right to call himself Attila the Hun if he felt like it, so Mitch got back to the point, which was how to get hold of the O'Shaughnessy dame and pull her in before she went out on her private massacre.

"About this wife of yours that wants to chop you up," Mitch said. "She around anywheres?"

Borsky gave the place a quick look that couldn't have spotted an elephant. "Not here," he said, "unless she hired somebody to do her dirty work."

"Could be," Mitch said. "Now if I'm going to take care of you, you better give me your schedule. And make sure you stick to it, too."

"Well, I'm booked at the Hotel Fremont, they got me a reservation for a couple of days. Tonight I'll eat up in my room and go to bed early. A trip like this — airplanes upset me — so I got to take it easy. Then tomorrow I'll go over to the concert hall and check the piano and maybe put in some practise for the evening."

"What for?" Mitch said. "You'll get all wore out."

"Look," Borsky said. "If you were going to pitch, you'd loosen up for a while, wouldn't you? And pitching a ball game is nothing compared to the workout I put in. First of all, I got to dress up like Paderewski, and I sweat. I lose five pounds every time I'm out there. And my fingers got to be in shape. Take a look at them."

He held up a hand with broad heavy fingers that ended up in thick pads. "The beating they take on the piano, they could pile-drive an oil rig fifty feet down. Anybody that thinks this racket is fun ought to try it. A different hotel every night. Receptions, and you got to pretend you like them. And then the fancy food they serve you, my stomach's backing up on me. And with dames all over you, they won't let you alone, and most of them ought to go back home and get reconstructed."

"Yeah," Mitch said. "Now one other thing — this concert, I ought to be there, where I can be ready for most anything. So me and the wife — you'll fix it up, huh?"

Borsky got the idea. "Sure. Where do you want to sit? First row? Or maybe an aisle seat a little further back. Depends on the acoustics, I guess."

"Up front sounds pretty good to me," Mitch said, "but you're the judge."

So everything looked okay, no trouble he could see. Mitch had his unmarked car outside, Number Four, which was the one he liked, and he took Borsky up to the Fremont and checked him in and practically tucked him in bed for the night, and then Mitch went home and told

Amy how they had tickets for the concert tomorrow night, and that was big stuff for Amy.

Mitch felt pretty good about things, and after dinner he had himself a beer and watched TV for a while without learning much, except that cops love danger and want nothing better than to get shot at a couple of times a week. That was news to Mitch. Still, he took it in stride, got to bed early, and was sound asleep when the phone rang.

What with it being around two in the morning, he figured it had to be bad news and it was, because the voice said, “Mr. Taylor? This is Bill, and I need you.”

“Bill? Bill who?”

“O’Shaughnessy. Borsky. Vladimir Borsky.”

“Oh, sure. Borsky. What’s up?”

“My wife. I think she’s here. You know my room, 807, so come over quick.”

“Be right there,” Mitch said. He put the phone down, told Amy something had come up, he had to leave, and then called the precinct and asked for a car. Five minutes later he was on his way to the Fremont, with Danny Epstein at the wheel.

The clerk, who had a long neck, was snoozing when Mitch got there, so Mitch told Danny to hang around for a while, Mitch might need him, and Mitch went on up to Room 807.

He tried the door first, before knocking, and it opened. The room was dark, though, except for a crack of light showing at the bottom of the bathroom door, and when Mitch got near it he could hear groaning inside. First off, before he did anything else, he had to figure out the best way to cover himself in case Borsky’d got himself cheesed up. And that was pretty easy, on account all Mitch had to say was he’d told Borsky to lock himself in and not open up for anybody except Mitch, and so that was the way it was, and Mitch opened the bathroom door.

The guy was flopped over the edge of the bathtub and was soaking his hands and he was hurt, but it wasn’t Borsky. Mitch grabbed him and stood him up, and the guy groaned and said, “My hands! I didn’t do anything. He was there waiting — with a hammer! He—”

Mitch picked him up on that and interrupted. “He?” Mitch said.

“He hit me on the hand. With a hammer.”

Mitch could see that a couple of fingers were pretty well mashed up, and he could guess what must have happened. This guy had found the door open, same as Mitch, and he’d probably stepped in to see if there was any loose cash around. This hammer nut must have been waiting inside, and what with the dark and being all keyed up, he’d jumped this guy and cracked down on his fingers before finding out

he'd ruined the wrong hands. After that he'd blown, and he wasn't Mary O'Shaughnessy and never had been, which Mitch hadn't believed in the first place. Because why would she chop up the fingers that earned the dough she lived off of?

The thing that bothered Mitch most, though, was that it seemed Borsky had set him up. What was supposed to happen was, Mitch would walk in and this hammer nut would take a crack at him and either make chop suey out of Mitch's hands or else miss and get strung out himself, but either way Mitch would probably make the collar, which would get this character out of Borsky's hair.

The guy here wasn't particularly worth Mitch's time, so Mitch frisked him and got his name, which happened to be Sanger. With that much done, Mitch went to the phone and asked for Danny to come up, Danny could handle it from here on in. While he was waiting, Mitch asked this Sanger a couple of questions, mostly about who'd done the hammer job on him.

"I never saw him," Sanger said in a croaking voice. "I got here by mistake, I was looking for my room and—"

"Skip it," Mitch said. "I don't give a damn why you were here, you can try your story out on Danny. All I want to know is who creamed you and what they looked like."

Sanger gave out with a couple of groans, maybe they helped him a little, and this was certainly a night he was going to remember. "I never saw him," Sanger said again, and sort of caught his breath. "I didn't know anybody was here and I never even saw him until he jumped me. With a hammer." Sanger took time out for another groan. "It hurts," he said.

Around then Danny came in, and he knew Sanger right off. "We had him in the slammer a couple of times," Danny said. "Just a grifter that sneaks into hotels and then goes around trying doors. Any time he finds one that isn't double-locked or chained, he floats in and lets his fingers scratch around."

"Well, he caught it this time," Mitch said, shaking his head. "Looks like he'll be out of circulation for a while."

The three of them took the elevator down together. Danny went through with his formal arrest, while Sanger kept sniveling and wanting nothing except a hospital. As for Mitch, he was busy batting a bunch of ideas around in his head, and chiefly where was Borsky.

The clerk, whose name was Vince something, was about as awake as he was ever going to be, and that was halfway back to last Tuesday. He swore he'd been on the job every minute and that nobody had come into the hotel during the last hour or so.

Mitch shut him up fast. "I did," Mitch said.

So it was pretty clear that anybody could have come in and out of

the hotel any time after midnight. The question was whether Borsky had, and why he'd left his door unlocked.

Mitch couldn't see Borsky leaving the hotel and walking around town for the fun of it, particularly if he needed protection, so he was either hiding out in the hotel somewhere, or else he was gone, and for good. But either way, somebody was loose with a hammer and wasn't using it to drive in any nails.

A lot of times you don't really figure things out, you just go ahead and do something, and then later on it adds up and you find out why you did it. That was how it was now when Mitch asked for a list of all the single dames who were registered in the hotel. While he was waiting, Mitch called home and told Amy that everything was okay but he probably wouldn't be back until some time tomorrow, tomorrow being today, if she knew what he meant. After that Mitch began making his calls to the list Vince handed him, and Mitch came out with the same question each time, until it got kind of monotonous. "Is Bill there?" he kept asking.

On account nobody likes the phone to wake them up around three or four in the morning, everybody didn't exactly cooperate. A couple of females, they just cursed him out. A few of them said, "Bill? Bill who?" Two of them got real mad and said, "There's no Bill here, never was, and never will be," and then slammed down the receiver. One dame, she just kind of whistled and then cut him off, but in the end Mitch had six names checked off. He looked at them for a while and then for no reason he knew of he crossed out two of them. After that he went upstairs to 807.

Borsky must have emptied his pockets and gone to bed last night, and then for some reason got up later on and dressed. Mitch could tell all that from the rumpled bed and from checking on Borsky's clothes and from the pile of stuff he'd stuck in the night table, like his wallet and a little book of addresses and some bills and other stuff. There were some professional cards with the name Vladimir Borsky engraved on them, and then there was another card that said, "In case of accident please notify." The name to be notified was Mary O'Shaughnessy, along with her address and phone number, so Mitch went and called her.

She started off in a voice, while it was maybe a little sleepy, it made you want to get over there and see what she was like. Mitch could kind of see her singing some good old Irish songs while Bill played the piano, and that was how they must have got started. But after Mitch explained who he was and what he was after, her voice sharpened up like a chain saw and he had to hold the receiver back from his ear on account he was afraid he'd break an eardrum.

"Calling me up three o'clock in the morning!" she yelled. "You're

a no-good cop and you use the phone to ask dumb questions on taxpayers' money, and they ought to dock your salary, which you're probably not earning in the first place. And where Bill O'Shaughnessy is, with his high-sounding Russian name and they ought to send him there and he'd find out he'd ought to kept the name he was born with, and it's a good Irish name and what's better? And who the hell are you and what did you say your name was?"

"Taylor."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, waking me up in the middle of the night. Is that all you got to do? Getting respectable people out of bed at three in the morning and bothering them with all those dumb questions about my husband, and he ought to be tied up on the back porch and fed bread and water. Where did you say he was?"

"I'm trying to find out."

"If you know Bill O'Shaughnessy and got half the brains you were born with, you'll go down to the nearest brothel and you'll find him trying to get them at half price, or maybe on sale at two for one, and you'd better stop bothering me or I'll get you fired. Who did you say you were?"

Mitch hung up. Borsky had his problems all right, but they had nothing to do with Mitch. He'd found out what he wanted to know, so he put the door on chain and lay down on the bed and went to sleep.

Borsky showed up around nine the next morning. His right-hand thumb had a bandage on and he looked kind of tired, but then he always did. Except for the thumb and he hadn't shaved, everything seemed okay.

Mitch gave him the silent treatment, and Borsky frowned, cleared his throat, and looked in the closet and then in the night table, and you could tell he was unsure of himself and trying to make up his mind what this was all about. He finally hit on what to say.

"Anything happen?" he asked.

"Not much."

That stopped him. He cleared his throat again and finally decided to come out with his end of last night's business.

"I got scared after I called you," he said. "I figured I was a sitting duck. I was alone here, anybody could come in, and I didn't know how long it would take you to get here. I heard noises out in the hallway and I thought I'd better beat it and let you handle things."

Mitch didn't say anything.

"You see, things have been piling up on me. My wife, these threats, my concert coming up tonight — I had to be alone. You can understand that, can't you?"

Mitch didn't answer.

“I found an empty room down the hall, so I went inside and locked the door and went to sleep. I just woke up. Anything happen here?”

“Who is she?” Mitch asked.

“She? What do you mean?”

Mitch picked up the list of names he’d weeded out and tried the first one. It was the Eberly female, and he read off the name. “Adele Eberly. She the one you slept with?”

That did it. Borsky kind of sucked in his breath and acted like he’d been caught snitching a can of beans in a supermarket. “How’d you know?” he asked.

“I got ways,” Mitch said, using his standard answer.

“Adele wants to marry me, if she can get a divorce. She saved me last night.”

“She leave home for you?” Mitch asked. “Her husband — is he the guy that’s after you with a hammer?”

“That’s right.” Borsky held up his hand as if he remembered it for the first time. “I hurt my thumb,” he said. “I don’t know what I’ll do tonight. I can’t play like this. Maybe my thumb’s broken.”

“Get hold of a doc,” Mitch said, thinking of how Amy would feel if the concert got canceled. “He’ll fix you up.”

“I don’t know. Not with a thumb like this.”

Mitch grabbed the guy by the shoulders and shook him. “Look,” Mitch said. “You’re going to play tonight. I don’t give a damn if that thumb kills you or if you never play again, but you’re going on tonight and you’re going to be good, and if you try to welch, you’ll get the kind of cop-beating you hear about. I never done it, but it would be a pleasure to try, so you and me are going to see a doc.”

“I’ll just stay here and rest up,” Borsky said.

“The hell you will. You got to do something for that thumb, and I know the guy who can do it.”

He called the dispatcher and got hold of Doc Sapaniel, who was the police surgeon, and Mitch explained the situation and asked who the best man in town was, and Sapaniel said it was Benjamin Farmer, he knew all about thumbs, he handled fighters at ringside, you could bust a thumb or a whole hand, and in the time between rounds he had you fixed up and back in there punching.

Mitch thought he had it all settled, until Borsky tried to pull a prima donna and say that no damn fight doctor was going to fiddle around with his thumb. He was a musician, and not some kind of a pugilist.

“You got a different kind of bones in you?” Mitch asked.

“Adele knows somebody,” Borsky said. “She’ll be here pretty soon. She’ll handle things.”

That gave Mitch the signal that something wasn't legit. Here Borsky didn't want his thumb to get fixed and Mitch didn't know what was wrong with it, if anything, so he said, "Let's see it."

Borsky backed off. "You a doctor?"

"Just let me see it," Mitch said again, and Borsky squirmed away like a kid that was afraid of a flu shot. So right now it was kind of a tie score between them, except Mitch wasn't going to leave it that way much longer.

"This girl friend of yours," he said. "Tell me about her."

"Nothing to tell," Borsky said.

"You and her got something cooked up," Mitch said. "What's the angle?"

Borsky didn't answer, and Mitch told himself the guy was trying to play five-handed solitaire all by himself. He had something going with this girl and he had a concert on tonight and a guy named Eberly was after him with a hammer on account Borsky was seeing the guy's wife on the sly and so Eberly wanted to ruin him, and here was Mitch homing in on whatever Borsky had dreamed up.

The knock on the door came about three minutes later. Borsky called out, "Who's there?" And a woman's voice answered, "It's me. Adele."

Borsky yelled out, "No — not now!" Only Mitch was way ahead of him and opened the door while Borsky was still calling out. So this female dynamo — all Mitch saw at first was a face with a lot of chin and with blonde hair falling all over it — was charging past Mitch and right behind her was this character with murder in his eye and a hammer in his hand and he looked like King Kong. Mitch got pushed back and almost fell, what with the two of them ramming him like they were hitting the line and hellbent for a touchdown.

Mitch hit the wall and sort of bounced back, and he grabbed a chair and slung it at King Kong, which knocked the big guy off-balance and gave Mitch time to come barreling in. That would have ended the whole business, except that the dame got in the way and slapped out at Mitch, not hard, but enough to keep him from grabbing the hammer.

You get in a mess like that, and you can't sort stuff out until later on. All Mitch was after was to stop the hammerer and save Borsky's hand, which Mitch managed to do by taking a poke at the hammerer and then knocking Borsky back on the bed, which got Mitch between the concert pianist and the hammerer. But in doing it, Mitch lost his balance, so him and Borsky ended up lying there on the bed while King Kong and the dame went racing out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

Mitch got on the phone to tell them downstairs to stop the pair

and call the police, only Borsky knocked it out of Mitch's hand. By the time Mitch picked up the phone it was still buzzing and nobody was at the other end. He figured the girl at the switchboard had maybe gone out for a cup of coffee or else she was fixing her hair, but in any case it was too late to stop the pair, so Mitch gave up. Still, he now had a handle on the whole business and had most of the facts wrapped up.

"That was the Eberly dame," he said, "and the guy with her, that was her husband. Right? And there's nothing wrong with that thumb of yours, but there would have been if I hadn't stopped the guy. And you just stood there and *waited* to get creamed. What for?"

"I was scared," Borsky said. "I didn't know what to do."

"The hell you say," Mitch said, and wondered why Borsky didn't want that concert tonight and why he was practically willing to have his hand busted. If this had been the fight game, Mitch would have had the answer, but who bets on a pianist? And what could you bet on?

Dough. Dough was involved. It always was and always would be, and so it had to be this time, too, which was more or less how Mitch happened to latch on to this theory.

"A guy like you," he said to Borsky, "you got pretty valuable hands. What do you make? A hundred grand a year?"

"Sort of."

"So if you're out of action, you make nothing. Right?"

Borsky agreed. "That's right."

"Then you got insurance on your hands," Mitch said. "How much?"

"You're crazy!"

"Easy to find out," Mitch said. "It must be plenty, to make you pull a fast one like this. And you're in trouble, my friend. You fixed it up for me to get conked, and that's conspiracy to commit assault and attempt to commit assault and maybe criminal solicitation besides, and just now that was interference with a police officer in the performance of his duty. That adds up to two misdemeanors and two felonies, so think it over and what it's going to mean."

Borsky didn't have to think it over. "It's all her fault," he said. "It was her idea. She's been following me around, she's driving me nuts, and last night she made this proposition. She had it all arranged with this doctor she knew, he's her cousin. He'd put me under an anesthetic and break my finger. It wouldn't hurt, and we'd say her husband had done it and I could collect all that insurance, which was enough so I could retire. With her."

"Think you'd get away with it?" Mitch said. "The insurance dicks would ask a lot of questions and one of the guys they'd ask would be me, and you know what I'd tell them."

"I haven't done anything."

"Not yet you haven't, but you better take off that bandage and start getting ready for tonight. Because it looks like this dame of yours switched sides and went back to her husband. He was going to commit mayhem and she threw a block on me when I tried to stop him, so where do you stand now?"

"Just keep Eberly away from me, because he's liable to kill me, him and his hammer. You saw what he tried to do, didn't you?"

"I thought you wanted him to, for the insurance."

"I don't know. She's trouble and I was crazy to listen to her and —" Borsky stared at his hands. "These are all I got, and she'll ruin me, she and that husband others. She's mad."

"Look," Mitch said. "I'll take care of him, you take care of yourself and them hands of yours." Then, patting his gun, he added, "And this says nobody's going to bother you, not till you get done with your piece tonight."

So Mitch had everything tied up real good. Eberly might make another stab at Borsky, and if he did, Mitch would be ready for him. With Eberly collared and Borsky safe, Mitch would be in pretty good shape, the story would hit the front page, the Commissioner would congratulate him, and Mitch was pretty sure they'd give him a day off, so what more could you want?

That was when the phone rang. It was Tony Spino, from the Fifth, and he was downstairs.

"Taylor?" he said. "We got a guy here by the name of Eberly. Somebody saw him running around loose with a hammer in his hand, so they called us and we got him down here. He was on his way out and he's making a lot of noise about some piano player. Know anything about it?"

"He was up here trying to commit mayhem on a guy who's been playing around with his wife."

"And you let him go?" Spino said, acting like he was surprised, which told Mitch what the official story was going to be and that Spino was due to get credit for the arrest.

Still, Eberly was on ice and the concert was safe, no trouble there. Mitch and Amy had about the best seats in the house, and afterwards they'd go back stage where there'd be a kind of reception, just for the VIP's. So all in all, things weren't too bad. They could have been worse, much worse.

The Problem of the Pink Post Office *by* Edward D. Hoch

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A new Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by Edward D. Hoch

Join Dr. Sam Hawthorne as once again he consults the file-cards in his memory-casebook and relates the puzzling circumstances of another "impossible crime"... Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" first appeared in 1845, and ever since, these past 136 years, it has been a standard detective-story concept — with innumerable variations. Here is a variation of 1929 — of October 24, 1929, to be exact; but this time the purloined letter, looked for everywhere, was nowhere to be found — or so it seemed...

"Now this is what I call a summer's day!" Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he poured the drinks. "Makes me feel young again! We can sit out here under the trees without a care in the world and reminisce about the old days. What's that? I promised to tell you about the Northmont post office and what happened back in 1929 on the day of the stock market crash? Well, I guess that was a memorable affair, all right — and it presented me with a problem unique among all the cases I helped investigate during those years. Unique in what way? Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning..."

The date, I well remember, was Thursday, October 24, 1929, (Dr. Sam continued), and in future years it would be known as Black Thursday, though several of the days that followed were even worse for the stock market. In the morning, though, it was just another autumn day in Northmont. The sky was cloudy, with the temperature in the low fifties, and there was a threat of rain in the air.

It was the day that Vera Brock finished painting her new post office, and since business was slow at the office my nurse April and I strolled down to see it. Until now the post office had always been located in the general store, and we viewed it as a sign of progress that the old sweet shoppe opposite the town square had been taken over by the government for a post office.

"Now we've got our own hospital *and* our own separate post office!" April exclaimed. "We're growin' bigger all the time, Dr. Sam."

"Boston better start worrying," I said with a smile.

“Oh, now you’re makin’ fun of me, but it’s true. Northmont’s going to be on the map.”

“The post-office map, at least.” I spotted our postmistress, Vera Brock, hurrying along the street with a can of paint. She was a solid woman in her forties who’d run the post office in the general store for as long as I’d been in Northmont. “Vera!” I called out to her.

“Morning, Dr. Sam. You an’ April coming for your mail?”

“We wanted to see the new post office.”

She hefted the can of paint. “This is opening day and I discovered one whole wall I forgot to paint! Can you believe that?”

She unlocked the post-office door and we followed her inside. “It’s pink!” April gasped, and I don’t think she would have been more startled if the walls had been covered with tropical vines. “A pink post office!”

“Well, the paint was cheap,” Vera Brock admitted. “Hume Baxter ordered it by mistake and he gave me a good price on it. I figured I’d save the government some money. Just last month the Postmaster General estimated this year’s deficit at a hundred million dollars and said the cost of a first-class letter might have to go up to three cents.”

“I can’t believe that,” April scoffed. “The two-cent letter is a tradition.”

“We’ll see. Anyway, I figured a cheap coat of paint wouldn’t do any harm.”

“But pink, Vera!” April exclaimed.

“It don’t look so awful to me, but then I guess I’m a bit color blind anyhow.”

The new post office was a good-sized room about twenty feet square, which had been split across the middle by a counter where people could go to pick up their mail or purchase stamps and postcards. The back wall was lined with the usual wooden pigeonholes where the mail was sorted for pickup. In those days, of course, there was no home delivery. Everyone had to come to Vera Brock’s post office for their mail.

“Well, I don’t think it looks half bad, Vera,” I said. “This town could stand some perkin’ up.”

The words were hardly out of my mouth when the door opened and in came Miranda Grey, the perkiest thing to hit Northmont in many a moon. I’d met Miranda the previous summer, during the business on Chester Lake, and we’d dated regularly for a few months. With the coming of autumn and the reopening of school, there was the usual increase in illness, and in my house calls. What with one thing and another, Miranda and I saw less of each other, though I suspected the fact that she’d stayed on in Northmont past the end of summer meant she had serious intentions. Maybe they were more serious than

mine.

"Hello, Sam, how are you?" she greeted me. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of you since last Saturday night. I was beginning to think you'd moved to Boston."

I tried to see if her eyes were laughing as she spoke to me, but they weren't. She was downright upset at my not having called her for five days. "This damp weather's brought on a lot of illness, Miranda. I've been busy day and night."

"I thought the new hospital was taking some of the load off you."

"It is, for serious illness. But they still call on me for the flu and the chicken pox. I just don't have as much free time as I had in the summer, Miranda."

Through all this exchange April stood to one side, eyeing Miranda with something like apprehension. I think April saw her as a threat to the office, and to my ability to devote all my time to our patients. For whatever reason, Miranda was a danger in April's eyes, and I'd become increasingly aware of it with each passing month.

About that time Vera Brock must have realized she wasn't going to get any painting done on the opening day of her new post office. We were there and more people were coming by all the time, no doubt attracted by the pink walls seen through the front window. She stood for a moment contemplating the unfinished job — the right-hand wall as you entered was still a dull yellowish-tan from the counter to the front. "I'm gonna ask Hume Baxter if he can close up his store for an hour and come paint this for me," she said. "I just don't have time to do it today."

"I can't believe you forgot to paint that whole part of the wall," April said.

"This big cabinet with all its pigeonholes was out there against the wall when I painted. They moved it back here yesterday and I discovered I'd forgotten to paint behind it."

"Wish I had the time, Vera," I said. "I'd do it for you."

"No, no, Dr. Sam, I wouldn't hear of it! Hume can be over here in ten minutes if he's not busy."

The idea of Hume Baxter ever being busy almost made me chuckle. He'd opened his paint, hardware, and farm-supply store right in the center of town about a year earlier, but how he managed to keep going with the small amount of business he did was more than I could figure out. Farmers didn't like to get all dressed up for a trip into town when they needed supplies in a hurry, and the amount of business he got from the townsfolk was minimal.

Still, everyone liked Hume Baxter because he tried so hard to please. And sure enough, within ten minutes he appeared at Vera's post office, paint brush in hand: He was a sandy-haired fellow in his

mid-thirties, just a little older than me, and he was barely in the door when Miranda began flirting with him.

"Oh, Hume, I'll bet you have plenty of time for your lady friends, don't you?"

He blushed and glanced around, as if seeking a quick exit. "Well, now, sometimes it gets busy at the store."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Hume," I told him. "That's just for my benefit. I've been neglecting her lately."

Hume Baxter spread out his drop cloths and opened the can of pink paint. "Well, now," he replied, entering into the banter, "I don't rightly see how anyone could be too busy for you, Miss Miranda."

"Thank you, Hume. You're a sweetheart!"

"You send me a bill for this paintin'," Vera told him. "I'll see to it the government pays."

"Sure will, Vera. I pay enough taxes. If l can get something back from them I'll take it."

He set to work with his paint brush while Vera opened the sack of morning mail and began sorting it into the pigeonholes behind the counter.

"Guess we'll be going along," I said, "and leave you to your work, Vera."

"Might as well wait another few minutes, Doc, and you can take your mail along."

"That's a good idea," I said, "if you don't mind us cluttering up your new place."

"I think I'll wait for my mail too," Miranda decided. She was working afternoons at the hospital as a nurse's aide, but I knew her mornings were free.

Hume Baxter had started painting at the front, working back toward the counter. "What did you think of the World Series, Doc?" he asked. "Never thought them Athletics would beat the Cubs." Philadelphia had defeated Chicago in four out of five games the previous week.

"I only got to hear part of one game on the radio," I admitted. "It was a busy week for me."

Our conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of Anson Waters, the town banker and one of our most distinguished citizens — except that he wasn't looking too distinguished at the moment. He carried a thin manila envelope as he hurried up to the counter.

"Land sakes, Mr. Waters," Vera Brock said, "you certainly look flustered this morning."

"Haven't you heard the news? The stock market is collapsing again! My broker just telephoned me from New York."

I was vaguely aware from the newspaper that there'd been heavy

losses in the market on Monday, and again on Wednesday, but it had seemed then to be a world apart from my existence. I couldn't help thinking that while Baxter talked of the World Series and Waters of the stock market, my world was different from theirs.

"What's happening?" Miranda asked him.

"It's a panic down on Wall Street," the banker informed her. "The scene on the stock exchange floor is so wild they've closed the visitors' gallery. And the ticker tape is so far behind actual sales that nobody knows what's happening. My broker needs cash from me to cover some stock I bought on margin."

"I can't help you there," Vera told him in her joking way. "This here's just a post office. Unless maybe he'll take stamps."

"It's nothing funny, Vera." He handed her the envelope. "This is addressed to my broker. It contains a railroad bearer bond in the amount of ten thousand dollars. I want to register this and mail it. He must have it by tomorrow—"

"I can't promise that," Vera told him.

"—or by Saturday morning at the latest. It's a short session on Saturday, so he'd need it before noon."

Vera was busy stamping the envelope and making an entry in her register. "This bond is negotiable?"

"That's right. My broker can cash it at once."

"Dangerous thing to send through the mails."

"That's why I want it registered."

"You said the value was ten thousand?"

"That's correct."

She totaled up the postage and registry fee and he paid them. Then Vera turned and placed the envelope on the desk behind her for special handling.

"You think the panic will last?" I asked Waters.

"If it does the whole country's in trouble. It could even throw us into a depression. The banking structure of this country is in bad shape, and I'm the first to admit it."

"I hope you're wrong," I said.

"I hope so too." He pocketed his registry receipt and headed for the door. "I have to get back to the telephone. I only pray things haven't gotten worse in the last half hour."

Vera bustled around behind the counter, sorting more of the morning's mail. "Land sakes, people like Anson Waters spend so much time watchin' their money they don't have time to enjoy it."

"That's the most unsettled I've ever seen him," April admitted. "In the bank he's usually like an iceberg."

"Maybe we should be glad we're not rich," Hume Baxter said. He was making good progress with the painting and was over half

finished already.

Vera completed the last of the sorting. “Well, now, I can give you your mail, Doc. And yours too, Miranda. Just one letter for you today.”

I took the little stack she handed me and glanced through it. There was nothing of importance, only a couple of bills and an announcement that a new salesman would be calling on me from one of the pharmaceutical houses. “This too,” Vera said, and reached across the counter with a weekly medical journal to which I subscribed. My parents had given me my first subscription when I graduated from medical school, and I’d been getting it ever since.

April and Miranda and I were starting for the door when it opened to admit the formidable bulk of Sheriff Lens, carrying a large cardboard box tied with stout cord. “Morning, folks,” he greeted us, making for the counter. He stopped almost at once and stared at the walls. “Pink?” he asked of no one in particular.

“Yes, pink!” Vera shot back. “I’m not taking any guff from you today, Sheriff. State your business and be gone!”

“I gotta mail this box off to Washington,” he said meekly. “It’s got some bottles in it that’re evidence in a bootlegging case.”

Vera lifted the middle section of the counter and opened a doorway that allowed him to pass through.

“Bring it back here,” she ordered. “I’m not goin’ to be lifting heavy boxes around.”

He did as he was told and set the box on her desk. “This okay?”

“Not on my desk, you old fool!” Her voice was so sharp that Sheriff Lens jerked the box off her desk and took a few steps back the way he’d come, almost tripping over Hume’s drop cloth. Vera sighed and said, “I’m sorry. Put it on this back shelf, Sheriff.”

He followed her instructions and deposited his burden on the shelf by the pigeonholes. “Sorry I offended you, Vera. I’m just tryin’ to do my job.”

“I’m too edgy this morning,” she admitted. “Opening this new place and all is a lot of work.”

“That’s all right, Vera,” Sheriff Lens told her with uncharacteristic restraint. “I understand.”

“I finished your paint job,” Hume Baxter announced, gathering up his drop cloths. “Don’t get too near the wall till it dries.” He bent to touch up a spot that he’d missed just above the floor level and near the counter as Vera came out to inspect his work.

“A right fine job, Hume, and much faster than I could ever have done it. What does the government owe you for it?”

“Couldn’t charge more than five dollars, Vera. I was here less than an hour.”

"Bill me for ten — it's worth it. I'll see that you get it."

Once more the women and I started to leave, but this time we found the doorway blocked by the return of Anson Waters. The little banker seemed even more distraught than before. "I'm being wiped out!" he screamed. "U.S. Steel's down twelve points!" In his hand he carried an engraved bond of some sort.

"You need an envelope to mail that," Vera pointed out.

He looked at it in surprise. "No time for another envelope! I'll put it in the first one. I have to send my broker another ten thousand."

"Can't," Vera said simply. "The first one's been mailed."

"It's still here, isn't it?"

"Well, yes."

"Then I'll add this to it. It's my own envelope. These people are witnesses." He turned to us for support, and Vera turned to Sheriff Lens.

"Don't you have some sort of form he can fill out to retrieve an envelope he's mailed?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, yes," Vera Brock admitted.

"Then have him fill it out, give him the envelope so's he can add to it, and then take it back again."

"All right," she agreed, turning toward the desk. "Except—"

"Except what?" the banker wanted to know.

"Except where in heck is that registered envelope?"

"You put it right on your desk," I said. "I saw you do it."

"I know I did, and I didn't move it off of there." She bent to peer under the desk, then straightened up. Her face was white as chalk. "It's gone!" she said, her voice breaking.

"Now wait a minute," I said, trying to calm everybody down. "If it is gone it's not gone very far because nobody's left this post office since you mailed it, Mr. Waters." I turned to look at April and Miranda and Vera and Hume and the sheriff and Waters. "There are seven of us here. Either the envelope got misplaced somehow or one of us has it."

"I was never anywhere near it," Miranda protested. "You certainly can't include me as a suspect, Sam."

"None of us are suspects," Sheriff Lens decided as Vera filled him in about the missing envelope. "It's gotta be here someplace."

The rest of us just stood there while Vera and the sheriff conducted a careful search, but the missing envelope was nowhere to be found. Anson Waters watched it all with growing impatience, glancing from time to time at the big clock on the wall. "Now it's noon — I'm probably ruined by now! You can be darned sure the Post Office Department owes me ten thousand dollars!"

"It'll turn up," Vera said, though she didn't sound too certain.

Finally Sheriff Lens turned to me. “Doc, what do you think?”

“We have to go about this systematically,” I decided. “The envelope was either stolen or misplaced. What was the size of it, Mr. Waters?”

“About nine by twelve inches, I think. It contained a bearer bond just like this one, with a covering letter. I wanted to send them flat, so I used a big envelope.”

“So it’s too big to have fallen into a drawer or behind the desk without being seen. The floor is covered with brand-new linoleum, so it couldn’t have fallen through a crack or anything like that. We’ve just finished searching for it without turning it up anywhere. I think we can conclude that it wasn’t misplaced. It was stolen.”

“The purloined letter!” Miranda exclaimed, though I could see the reference meant nothing to the others.

“That’s right,” I agreed. “In the Poe story the letter was in plain view all the time, only nobody noticed it. If, as Chesterton wrote, a wise man hides a leaf in a forest and a pebble on a beach, what better place to hide a stolen letter than in a post office?”

“Look here,” Vera said, “only the sheriff and I were behind the counter with that letter. Are you saying one of us must have stolen it?”

“You were sorting the morning’s mail, Vera. It would have been a simple task for you to slide the letter into one of those pigeonholes, to be retrieved later.”

April unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and popped it into her mouth. It was her one bad habit, but I usually let it pass. “You really think that’s where the missing letter is, Dr. Sam?”

“I think it’s worth a look.”

So we looked.

But we didn’t find the letter. It wasn’t with any of the other mail, either in the pigeonholes or the incoming and outgoing sacks.

“I told you so,” Vera announced, restored to grace. “I wouldn’t steal my own letter.”

“It’s my letter, not yours!” Anson Waters insisted.

“While it’s in this post office it’s mine,” Vera responded. “Even if I don’t know where it is.”

“All right, Sheriff,” I said. “You’re next.”

“What? Me?”

“Vera’s right, you know. You were the only other one to step behind that counter, and none of us could have reached the desk from this side.”

“But how could I have—”

“With that box. I read somewhere that the police in New York caught a shoplifter using a special box with a false bottom. You set

your box on that desk, right on top of where the letter was."

"I didn't see no letter!"

"Nevertheless, I'm going to have to ask you to unwrap your box."

"Come on, Doc!"

"Look, Sheriff, we've been friends a long time. But you're a suspect like everyone else this time. I'm sorry about it."

Sheriff Lens continued to grumble but he unwrapped the package. A close examination showed there was no false bottom, and nothing inside but some carefully wrapped jars that had contained moonshine liquor. There was no envelope.

"What does that do to your theory?" Waters asked, growing impatient. "You've offered two solutions but I haven't seen you produce my missing envelope yet."

I was still young and cocky in those days, and very sure of myself. "Don't worry, Mr. Waters. There are seven of us here, and I can offer seven solutions. If Vera and Sheriff Lens didn't steal your envelope we'll have to look further afield."

"But they were the only ones behind the counter," Hume Baxter protested.

"But not the only ones who could have stolen the envelope. Let's take you next, Hume. Suppose the sheriff pulled that envelope onto the floor when Vera yelled at him and he retreated a few steps with his box. It could have fallen just outside the counter opening, onto your drop cloths."

"I didn't—"

"And it could be hidden in one of the folds of those drop cloths right this minute. Suppose we have a look."

So we searched the drop cloths, and just for good measure we had a careful look at his brushes and paint bucket too.

There was no envelope.

"This gets more impossible all the time," April observed. "You think I might have stolen it too, Dr. Sam?"

"I'm afraid you're a suspect with the rest of us, April. Once again, if the envelope fell just outside the counter opening, you might have picked it up while our attention was distracted by the sheriff and Vera."

"And did what with it?"

"You're chewing gum, April. You might have stuck the envelope to the underside of the counter with a wad of gum."

It was such a likely explanation that they all bent down to look at once. But there was no envelope under the counter. There was nothing under the counter.

The little banker snorted. "You're striking out every time, Hawthorne. Who's next — your girl friend?"

I'd avoided looking at Miranda till now, but there was no way out of it now. "You could have picked it up and hidden it under your skirt, Miranda," I said very quietly.

"Sam, the very idea! What do you intend to do, search me?"

"I want April and Vera to search you."

"Sam!" She seemed close to tears. "Sam Hawthorne, if you make me do this I'll never speak to you again!"

"I'm sorry, Miranda. I have to rule out every possibility."

"Come on," Vera suggested. "The three of us womenfolk will search each other. Then it won't be so bad. You men turn your backs!"

Miranda calmed down a bit and we did as Vera suggested while the women carefully searched each other. Miranda wasn't hiding the envelope and neither were the others.

"That's everybody," Anson Waters said. "Now what, Hawthorne?"

"It's not everybody, it's only five people. There's still you and me, Mr. Waters."

"You think I stole my own letter?"

"You registered the letter, insuring its value for ten thousand dollars. Now suppose there was never a bearer bond in it. Suppose it was just an empty envelope and the only bond was the one you brought in to *add* to the envelope. The post office loses ten thousand dollars, which could be a big help to you with the market plunging."

"An empty envelope! That's absurd! Even if it were true, how would I make an empty envelope disappear?"

"You might have written the address with disappearing ink. If Vera noticed an empty envelope on the floor with no address on it, she might have put it in a drawer or thrown it away."

But of course Vera spotted the flaw in my reasoning at once. "Even if the address faded away, it would still have its stamps on it, and the registry notice. I'd have known it was the same envelope."

She was right and I had to admit it. "That still leaves me," I said. "I know I didn't steal the envelope, but the missing bond could have been removed and folded into a small packet. It might have been slipped into my pocket without my knowing it. I think it's time somebody searched me, and I guess you're the most likely one, Sheriff."

While he was at it Sheriff Lens searched Hume Baxter and the banker too. There was no envelope and no bearer bond, except the second one Waters had brought with him. I searched the sheriff in turn, with the same result.

"Seven people," Anson Waters snorted, "and seven solutions to the mystery! Only trouble is, all seven of them are wrong! What do you do next, Hawthorne, examine us with a stethoscope? Maybe one of them ate my bond."

"I hardly think so," I answered seriously. "Paper would dissolve in the stomach acids and the bond would be destroyed."

Waters turned toward Vera. "I'm holding you personally responsible for my bond!"

"Do you want to mail the other one to your broker?"

"I wouldn't trust you with it! I'll take the train to New York tonight and deliver it personally!"

With those words the banker stormed out, leaving the rest of us standing there. For the first time the strain of the morning began to show on Vera Brock. She seemed close to tears as she said, "And I wanted my opening day to be such a success. Now it's ruined." April seemed embarrassed by this sudden show of emotion. "I'd better be getting back to the office, Dr. Sam," she decided. "A patient might have been tryin' to reach us."

"Good idea," I agreed. It was time for me to leave too. There was no solution to this mystery of the missing envelope.

I fell into step beside Miranda as she walked along Main Street. "I'm sorry the way things went in there," I said quietly. "I didn't really think you stole the letter."

"Oh, didn't you? Your performance certainly fooled me! I felt as if I were on my way to jail."

"Miranda, I—"

"It's all over between us, Sam. I think I knew it before today."

"It's not over unless you want it to be."

"You're not the same man you were last summer, Sam."

"Maybe you're not the same either," I answered sadly.

We parted at the corner and I crossed over to my office. Sheriff Lens came around the back of the building and headed me off. "You got a minute, Doc?" he asked me.

"Sure, Sheriff. I just finished apologizing to Miranda, so I'd better do the same with you. I didn't really think you hid that letter in your package, but I had to look everywhere."

"I understand," he assured me, "but Vera's plumb upset about the whole business. She's afraid Washington might even remove her as postmistress if she loses a ten-thousand-dollar letter on opening day."

"Does it concern you that much, Sheriff?" I asked him.

"Well, yeah. You know, Doc, Vera's a mighty attractive woman for her age. An old coot like me gets lonesome after all these years as a widower."

A light began to dawn. "You mean you and Vera Brock—?"

"Oh, she loses patience with me sometimes, like this morning, but most times we get along fine. I been over to her house a few times..." His voice trailed off and then started again. "You know I'm not much

of a detective, Doc. Not much of a sheriff, either, if the truth be known. Maybe the town's gettin' too big for the likes of me."

"You're an important part of the town, Sheriff."

"Yeah, but I mean now Vera's in trouble an' I don't know no way of gettin' her out of it. Damned if I know who stole that envelope, or how. We searched everywhere."

"Yes, we did," I agreed. "We searched the floor and the desk and all those pigeonholes and the mail sacks. We searched Baxter's drop cloths and painting gear. We searched under the counter and even under Miranda's skirts. We searched every single one of us. I'm ready to swear there's no place in that post office where the letter could have been hidden, and yet there's no way it could have left the post office either. There were no mail pickups while we were there, and no one left the place during the crucial period."

"Then you're as baffled as I am, Doc?"

"I'm afraid so," I admitted. "Maybe I do better with murder cases when you have a motive staring you in the face. This theft has a universal motive — anyone can use ten thousand bucks, even banker Waters."

"Well, if you think of anything that might help her, Doc, we'd sure appreciate it. Both of us."

"I'll try, Sheriff."

As I went on into my office I thought that was the most human moment I'd spent with Sheriff Lens in the seven years we'd known each other.

And maybe if one romance had died at the post office that morning, another had been strengthened.

The worst of the Wall Street panic was over by noon, as banks decided to pool their resources and support the market. Stock prices even rallied a bit in the afternoon, and April returned from a trip to the bank with the report that Waters was actually smiling.

I had only one appointment scheduled after lunch, and when my patient had been sent on her way I got my collection of Edgar Allan Poe down from the shelf and reread "The Purloined Letter." But it told me nothing.

In Vera's post office all letters were suspect and all had been examined. There was no letter in plain view that we had missed.

I'd failed Vera Brock and Sheriff Lens. Most of all, I'd failed myself.

At the end of the day April came in to say good night. It was starting to drizzle outside and I hardly recognized her in her new raincoat.

"You look so different," I said.

"Coats do that sometimes."

Coats.

After she'd gone I sat at my desk and thought about coats.

Was it possible?

Already it was growing dark outside, and night would fall within the hour. If I was right this time, there was an easy way to prove it before I told anyone else and made a bigger fool of myself. I locked up my office and walked down Main Street through the damp drizzle.

When I reached the post office I peered through the big front window and wondered how to go about getting inside. Vera had left a small light burning toward the back and it cast an eerie glow over the fresh pink walls. I supposed there might be an alarm system on the doors, though I could see no evidence of one.

But if I was right about the hiding place of the stolen letter, the thief would return tonight too. Maybe all I had to do was wait.

"Still looking for the thief, Hawthorne?" a voice behind me asked. I turned and saw Anson Waters, his collar up and hat pulled down against the rain.

"I had another idea I thought I'd check out."

"I've already filed a claim for the missing bond."

"I thought you were taking the train to New York tonight."

"I am. The 10:45 to New Haven. I'll change trains there."

He was starting to say something else when I thought I heard the muffled breaking of glass. The light in the post office had gone out. "Quick!" I told the banker. "Get Sheriff Lens!"

"What—?"

"Don't ask questions!"

I left him standing there and ran around the back of the building. A pane of glass had been broken and a window raised. I climbed over the sill and searched around for the light switch. The overhead lights went on, blinding us both for an instant, but then I saw him.

"Hello, Hume."

Hume Baxter stared at me, the stolen envelope in his hand. "How'd you know, Sam? How in hell did you know?"

"It took me a while, I'll admit, but I finally tumbled to it. The only place we didn't look. Like Poe's purloined letter, it was right in front of us all the time and we didn't see it."

Later, after Sheriff Lens had arrived to take charge of Hume Baxter and the stolen envelope, I explained, "I got to thinking about how coats can cover up things and change their appearance, and that made me think of a coat of paint. You see, what happened was that you set your box right on top of Anson Waters' envelope. When Vera yelled and you yanked it back up, the envelope got caught in the cord around the box and hung there. You stepped back a few paces, just

outside the counter, and the envelope fell to the floor."

"How could that happen without someone seeing it?" Sheriff Lens wondered.

"But someone did see it," I reminded him. "Hume Baxter saw it. Think about our various positions in the room and you'll realize he was in the best position to see it. You were holding a large box that blocked your view of the floor. And once you'd moved back a few paces the counter was between you and Vera, obstructing her view. Miranda, April, and I were near the door, on our way out, and your back was to us. Waters wasn't present at that point. Only Hume Baxter, off to the side with his paint brush, was likely to see what happened. While you followed Vera's instructions and carried the box to that back shelf, Hume tossed one of his drop cloths over the envelope and then managed to pick it up.

"In a single quick gesture he stuck it to the freshly painted wall just above the floor level and near the counter, where the shadow of the counter top kept the light from falling directly on it. And then he painted pink over it. I remember him bending to touch up a spot by the counter. The face of the envelope was against the wall of course, so the stamps didn't show through. And the buff color of the manila envelope wasn't that different from the original yellowish-tan brown color of the walls before they were painted, so the pink was about the same shade on the envelope."

"But how come we didn't see it even so, Doc?"

"Several reasons. For one, Hume warned us not to get too close to the wet paint and nobody did. For another, down near floor level, partly under the counter, it didn't show. A freshly painted wall is always wet and streaky looking till it dries, so the edges of the envelope weren't noticeable. It was a large envelope but very thin, remember. There were only two unfolded sheets of paper inside — the bearer bond and a letter."

"What about when the paint dried?"

"Exactly! The envelope might fall away from the wall, or at the very least its edges would come loose and be more visible. That's how I knew he'd have to come back for it tonight. He'd even brought along a little pink paint to touch up the spot again after he removed the envelope."

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "What people won't do for money."

"Or love," I added and gave him a wink. Vera Brock was coming through the post-office door.

"I said at the beginning it was a unique case," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, "and it was. For one thing there was no murder, and for another my solution showed that it was Sheriff Lens himself who

actually aided the thief by snagging that envelope with his box. I guess in a way they both paid for their crime because Hume Baxter went to jail and Sheriff Lens went to the altar. That's right — it didn't work out for Miranda and me, but it sure did for Vera and the sheriff. It was one of the happiest weddings I ever attended, despite a locked-room murder on the very day of the ceremony that almost — but that's for next time!"